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Story By
YOJI ENOKIDO
Original Concept and Project By
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Fooly Cooly

Volume 3

Yoji Enokido
GAINAX

STORY: Yoji Enokido
ORIGINAL WORK: GAINAX
ILLUSTRATIONS: Kazuya Tsurumaki and Hiroshi Imaishi
TRANSLATION: Gemma Collinge
DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Michael Paolilli
COVER DESIGN: Jose Macasocol, Jr.
SENIOR EDITOR: Jenna Winterberg

PRE-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR: Vincente Rivera, Jr.
PRINT-PRODUCTION SPECIALIST: Lucas Rivera
MANAGING EDITOR: Vy Nguyen
SENIOR DESIGNER: Louis Csontos
SENIOR DESIGNER: James Lee
SENIOR EDITOR: Bryce R Coleman
SENIOR EDITOR: Jenna Winterberg
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Marco F. Pavia
PRESIDENT AND C.O.O.: John Parker
C.E.O. & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER: Stu Levy

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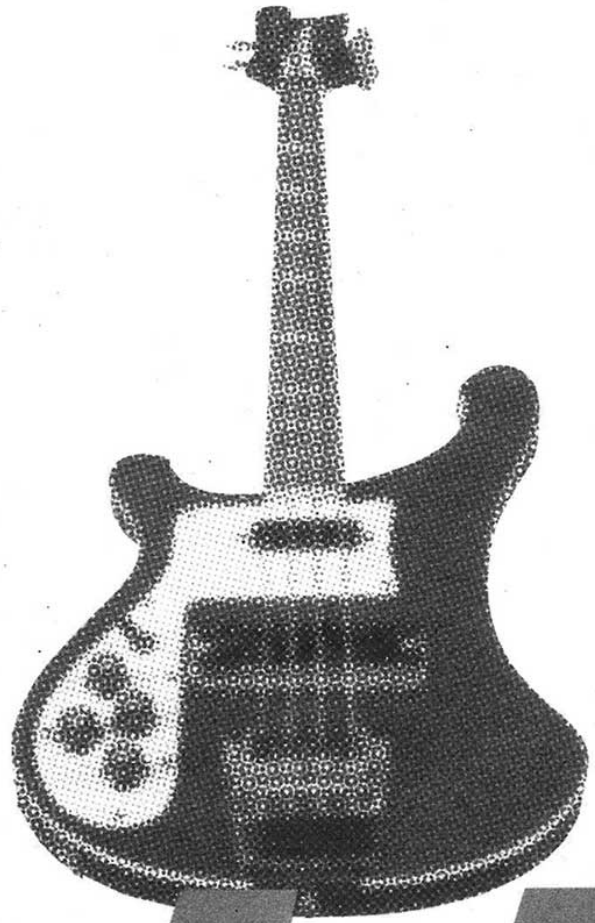
Naota’s father witnesses an unpredictable kiss between Naota and Haruko. Displeased with this development, he challenges Naota to a winner-takes-all duel! Not wanting to disappoint Haruko, Naota accepts the battle. Meanwhile, Mamimi's demeanor has become a bit more than eccentric. Could it possibly be...jealousy?

Experience the third novelization of the crazy anime as the CLIMAX begins!



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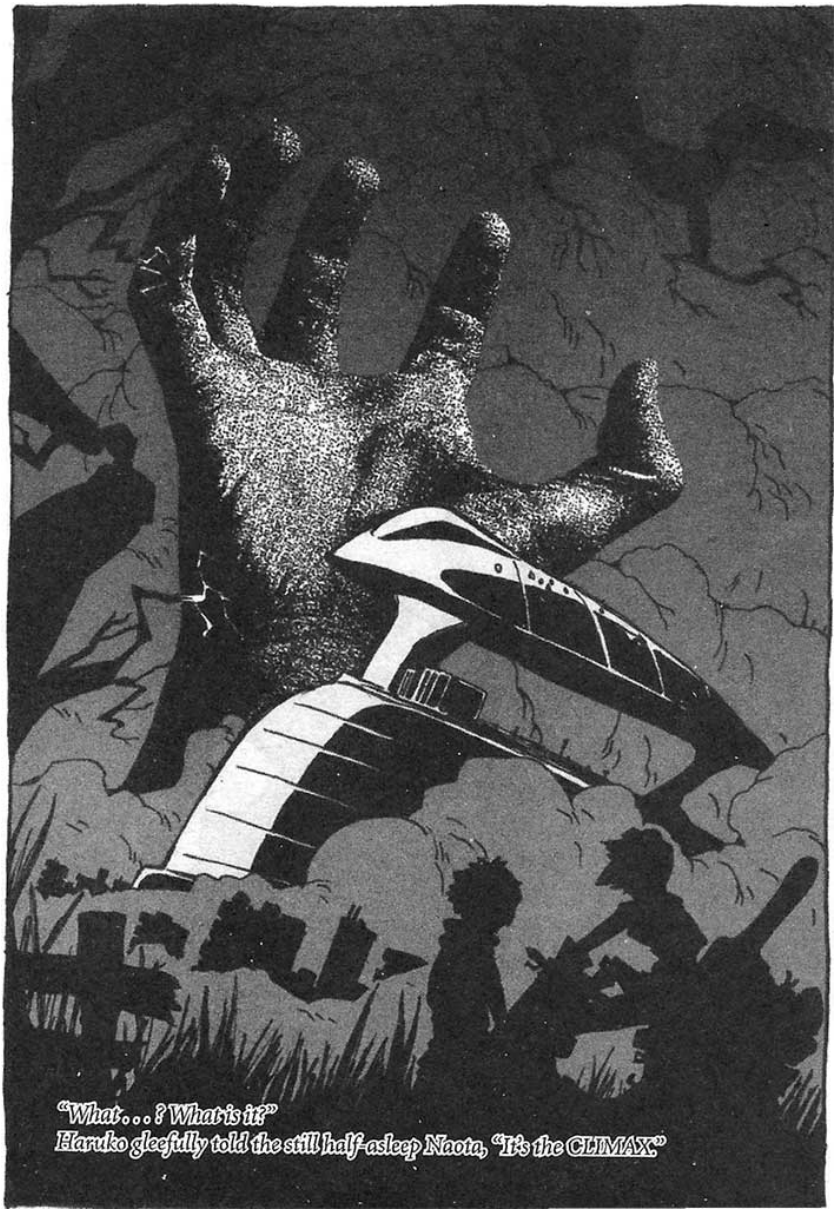

"What . . . ? What is it?"
Haruko gleefully told the still half-asleep Naota, "It's the CLIMAX."

Chapter 1

Huff, huff, huff. Naota's heavy breath condensed before dispersing into the autumn evening air.

Next to him, Haruko huddled up.

That day, that afternoon, that moment, on the bank near Mabase Bridge, sixth-grader Naota and housemaid Haruko were crouched down in the long grass, hiding themselves and keeping vigilant.

The air around them was full of danger. The situation was serious, and they were feeling the anxiety of the hunted.

Damn, they've got us!

At that moment, Naota and Haruko were being targeted by a sniper and were trapped in their position.

Only moments ago, they had exchanged numerous deadly bullets, the dry sound of gunshots ringing out emotionlessly. And in their hands, they clutched guns that glistened an ill-fated black. Naota was holding an Mil Ingram; Haruko had a bigger Uzi submachine gun.

This was a battlefield.

The area around Mabase Bridge had turned into the front of a dangerous battle.

And although the air was cool, the handle of Naota's gun was dripping with sweat.

The only noise now was the quiet babbling of the river, which only increased Naota's disconcertion. *Don't panic. Don't be scared*, Naota told himself, holding his breath.

Haruko tapped Naota softly on the shoulder. She was squinting at a thicket in front of her. *"Look over there."* She indicated the base of

the concrete pillar holding up the bridge.

That was definitely where the enemy was hiding. He could sense their presence. His anxiety on the battlefield had proven to be unusually perceptive… of course. After all, the moment he let down his guard, he would end up part of that other world.

With the mouth of the machine gun, Haruko signaled for Naota to go first.

"Am I your decoy?!"

Haruko shot Naota an annoyed expression in response to his complaint. And then, she kicked the boy flying. "Go! Die for our love!"

"WAAAAHHHH!"

Naota lamented his bad luck at falling into this situation. *Why did this have to happen to me?*

It all had started the night before.

The night before, around dinnertime, Natota was practicing his swing in the backyard, which was buzzing with crickets. His batting form didn't look as though it had improved at all, but Naota's expression now bore a confidence that hadn't been there a few days before.

In this very special baseball season, Naota had gained confidence—to the point that he was feeling a little high. The basis for Naota's confidence was that he had saved the town with his batting. That was, of course, when the satellite bomb had fallen to Earth, and Naota had knocked it out of the atmosphere with a guitar.

My batting saved this town. Perhaps I'm already a great man, an equal to my brother. No. My brother never would've been able to hit a falling satellite bomb with a guitar. I'm already stronger than my brother!

When it came down to it, Naota had indeed saved Mabase from

ultimate destruction; however, he couldn't deny that Haruko, that superhuman girl, also had been a part of the equation. Remembering that fact, Naota doubted that he'd surpassed his well-admired brother, and that thinking so was just his imagination gone wild.

When you're happy, though, you don't notice that you're mostly just pleased with yourself. Having some confidence in oneself is not such a bad thing, of course; after all, if you don't believe in yourself enough to meet new challenges, then you'll never grow. True confidence is not simply the result of growing older, though; for true confidence, one must possess grace. And true diligence is needed for someone to believe he really has tried his best.

For Naota to realize that kind of true confidence, it would take some more time still.

"Good swing."

"Grandpa!"

Although Naota had been unaware of it, Shigekuni had been watching the boy's swing from the balcony.

"Haruko said so, too. You have potential."

"Yeah?"

Looking at his grandson with an expression that wasn't all that dissatisfied, the old man nodded.

Now, coming from Shigekuni, those words didn't actually mean Naota's grandpa was impressed with Naota's batting. In fact, when Shigekuni compared the boy to his older brother, batting genius Tasuku, the Martians' veteran coach could see that the younger child was nothing more than second-rate when it came to baseball.

But though he suspected Naota would never live up to his older brother's promise, this grandson of Shigekuni was still only twelve, too young for his grandpa to second-guess what lay in store for him. And watching him practice his swing, it seemed as if he wasn't adverse to baseball. And he continued to train even though he was

bad, which wasn't entirely a wasted effort—after all, he could learn a lot from team play. At any rate, the old man was satisfied that Naota had some interest in baseball; he would just have to nurture him with a lot of praise. Or so thought Shigekuni, who had built his whole life around baseball.

It was a picturesque scene, the old man who loved baseball watching his grandson play.

The problem lay in what happened next.

After practicing his swing to his heart's content, Naota cheerfully made his way up to the second floor, walking into his room without thinking twice, and stopping dead in his tracks. There, in his room, was Haruko. Haruko had been sharing a room with him for a while now, so it wasn't surprising that she was there; what was surprising was her appearance.

Naota was confused about where to direct his gaze. Haruko was wrapped up in her towel as though she'd just gotten out of the bath, and it looked like she'd just moments ago put on her underwear. This was the first time since they'd started living together that Naota had seen her like this. Plus—though he had merely dismissed her as a ridiculous girl in the beginning, Naota had found himself having other thoughts recently when he'd casually glanced at her body.

"Me, have personal feelings for him?" Haruko, clad only in her underwear and a towel, was pacing up and down, and talking to someone who wasn't there again.

"That's not true. That's not the reason this mission is taking so long. The N.O. channel is still open, so it doesn't make a difference if I like him or not… Oh, hey, were you listening?"

Haruko finally noticed Naota. Of course, she didn't care at all that he was there while she was half-naked. Instead, she took off her bath towel and started adjusting her bra.

Naota averted his eyes from her naked skin and looked around the room. Only Miyu Miyu was present, sitting on the desk, so Haruko

had been talking to no one again.

But today, rather than worrying about her talking to herself, the contents of what Haruko had said were on Naota's mind.

Haruko had said, *"Me, have personal feelings for him?"*

"Is there… anyone?" Naota asked, pretending to be calm.

"What?"

"Anyone you like?"

Me, have personal feelings for him? Him. Maybe that person was himself. Haruko had come to live here because of him, after all.

"Do you like it? The way I smell straight out of the bath? Here, sniff me."

Instead of answering Naota's question, Haruko laughed provocatively and suddenly pushed out her breasts, covered only by her bra, toward Naota. She was a childish girl.

As she aggressively pressed her body against him, Naota brushed off Haruko with words: "Put on some clothes."

"You're blushing. You should grow up some more."

"Who are you to talk?"

Embarrassed, he forcefully pushed away Haruko's arms, which hugged him from behind—but then, he lost his balance and fell over. His feet got tripped up, and he fell face up, coming directly into contact with Haruko's clean skin. It almost seemed like he had been pushed over.

Suddenly, their faces were right next to each other. Feeling as though those green eyes could see straight into him and sense his hidden desire, Naota went pale.

"Want me to teach you guitar?" Haruko asked.

Guitar?

"Why?"

"Why doesn't Takkun try using his guitar again? *Bam!* You were so great last time."

As she said that, it almost looked as if Haruko blushed— but perhaps that was just Naota's imagination acting up again.

No, Haruko definitely just praised me. She definitely *praised me!*

His heart started to thump wildly. It was a weird sensation, as though he were being enveloped by a powerful magnetism coming from Haruko's eyes, mouth, and breasts. The scent released by her bare skin seemed to assault Naota's senses.

From the back of the boy's head, another bump suddenly popped out. And as the force of the horn pushed him forward, his lips pressed against Haruko's.

Mouth to mouth, the feeling of Haruko's lips…

"Oh, Takkun, that's it!" Haruko beamed deliberately.

"No, the horn, it—"

"My first kiss…"

"Liar! You've done it loads!"

"… with Takkun. Ah!"

"No, it was the horn!"

While attempting to push in the horn that was coming from the back of his head, Naota desperately tried to explain. It was because of the horn that he had kissed her. Explaining that he hadn't done it of his own volition seemed to be more important to him than the new horn at that moment.

"Naota!"

Suddenly, Kamon screamed from outside the window.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"That's what I wanted to ask!"

Oh no, Naota thought. Apparently, Kamon had been out on the balcony, spying on them. He'd probably been watching Haruko change. It was unfortunate—or perhaps fortunate—that his father couldn't see the horn growing out of Naota's head from the balcony. All Kamon must have seen was Naota giving Haruko a real kiss.

Kamon's expression was one of pure jealousy.

"Naota, you and I will duel for Haruko."

"I'm in!" Haruko answered.

For such a stupid reason…

Now, on this day, this afternoon, this moment, everything depended on what happened in the match between him and his father. After

Kamon's strongly worded challenge, they had decided upon a survival game.

A survival game… otherwise known as Airsoft or a BB gun war. Surely, everyone knows what a survival game is—a game that came to Japan in the early '80s from America, wherein the participants armed themselves with toy air guns and split into two teams to battle it out.

Kamon had been really into the sport when it first came over to Japan, and he was the reason everyone was fully dressed up in goggles, boots, and gloves today. He himself was completely covered from head to toe in camouflage clothing.

Apparently, Kamon held a very strict aesthetic with regards to toys. For example, he had a fair collection of air guns, but he made fun of those who collected model guns. (By way of explanation to those not in the know: The difference between air guns and model guns is the ability to fire bullets. Air guns have the capability to shoot out little plastic balls called BBs, whereas model guns are things that exist only to be looked at; though very realistic-looking, they have no working parts.)

According to Kamon, an air gun was a "real toy," but a model gun was a "fake gun." It was his policy that function was more important than appearance when it came to the toys.

Naota thought this was idiotic. Whether a real toy or a fake gun, they both were toys when it came down to it, and not something an adult should be into.

He thought of himself as grown up, but Naota eventually had agreed to participate in this survival game per Kamon's conditions because Naota didn't entirely dislike this kind of game himself.

It would be helpful to note that the rules of a survival game are not totally fixed; rather, the rules of combat are dependent on the participant and the region. The ones that Kamon had selected that day were standard rules used in a match up called Center Flag, a simple game wherein the participants divided into two teams, and the first team to capture the flag in the center of the field would

win.

Naota and Haruko were the blue team, and Canti and Kamon were the opposing red team.

Kamon had objected to the pairing, but Haruko wasn't going to concede. It seemed she had wanted it to be dramatic, with Naota protecting her from being reclaimed by Kamon.

And so, Haruko and Naota wore blue headbands, Canti and Kamon wore red ones, and they fought. Only, Naota was covering his head with the hood of his parka, considering that as of the day before, a horn was growing there—one much different from all the others. Even when Naota pushed on it, it wouldn't go back in.

The horn this time very much resembled the hammer of a pistol.

"Hurry and go!" Haruko shouted, kicking Naota in the back.

"Stop it!"

Pushed into the open, Naota quickly tried to hide himself in the grass again, but Haruko wasn't going to allow that. She pushed him out again.

"Don't use me as a human shield."

"Then, was that kiss just a game?"

Mouth to mouth… Haruko's lips…

"What's the matter, Naota?" Kamon called from somewhere. "Be a man! Come out and fight me face-to-face!"

Bullets came flying at Naota, narrowly missing him.

In a survival game, there is a strict rule whereupon if an enemy bullet hits you, you have to declare it out loud and then sit out for the rest of the game as a "corpse." In other words, you say, "dead," and then fall to the ground without another word. It is a *terrifying* game.

"Come on, what's the matter, son?" Kamon called again. "If you run away scared, then your dad is going to take Haruko from you."

"Oh no, Takkun." Her voice very helpless, Haruko clung to Naota.

"Cut it out, already!" But even as Naota said that, he looked kind of happy.

Their bodies close, he was surrounded by the scent of Haruko again —the scent of Haruko, who was in love with him.

Nothing I can do, I guess, I'll have to protect her.

"Wait here."

"Oh, you're so amazing, Takkun."

Gripping the gun, he carefully and quickly scuttled toward the clump of grass where Kamon's voice was coming from, keeping his upper body down low. He felt pretty confident Naota had this one in the bag.

Kamon had lost by calling out and revealing his position. If Naota could use the element of surprise, he would win. He already had the big advantage of stealth thanks to his smaller body, but he couldn't let his guard down, as Canti could be waiting somewhere to ambush him.

He saw a shadow coming from the other side of the tuft of grass— camouflage gear. It was Kamon, and it didn't look like he had noticed Naota yet.

I've got you! Naota leapt into the grass to catch his father from behind. Without a moment's hesitation, he pulled the trigger of his Ingram. Four shots, five shots, bullets that would hit their target without fail…

However, what Naota had shot was a decoy. It was a log dummy dressed in camouflage gear.

"Too easy!" A speaker from next to the dummy suddenly screamed. "You're just too easy, Naota."

Sensing the danger, Naota tried to flee—but suddenly, the ground underneath his feet disappeared. A hole! It was a trap that Kamon had set. He'd probably prepared it the night before.

Naota was barely able to cling to the edge of the pit and heave himself out from the deep, well-like, which even an adult would find difficult to get out of. The bottom of the hole was dark, the sun unable to reach it.

He went this far…?

Kamon loved survival games, and he was obsessed with Haruko. For these two reasons, he was not treating this game as a laughing matter.

Right then, enemy bullets came flying toward Naota, who jumped feverishly back into the thicket.

Unbeknownst to the players, there was someone secretly watching the entire survival game through a scope from a car parked on top of the bridge… a young woman.

When the woman finally caught Canti in her scope, she took out a large military transceiver and flicked the switch.

"Target sight confirmed," she reported. "It's blue. Repeat: blue."

"So, it isn't red," confirmed a male voice that sounded as if it could be her superior. It was the voice of Commander Amarao.

The woman who was watching Canti through the scope was an officer of the Department of Interstellar Immigration. She was one of the operators who'd been in the monitor room beside Amarao at the time of the falling satellite bomb incident.

She had a childlike face, but she was in her twenties. The dark, freckled woman was called Kitsurubami.

"They're just playing a game. Looks pretty stupid. I think I can do this myself." Having given that report to her superior, Kitsurubami

got down off the car and pulled out some equipment. She looked pretty happy to do so.

The truth was that Kitsurubami had long wished for this kind of front-line work. This was her ideal job. What she removed from her car was an oversized, long-barreled, black firearm—a Degtyaryov sniper rifle, which made a perfect addition to this battle.

Hers, however, was no toy.

Chapter 2

Situated on the top of the hill, Medical Mechanica had decided to show its true form and take action.

Canti's escape combined with the intervention of the brotherhood had MM more alarmed than it had ever been before. Recently, there had even been signs that MM was going to ignore the treaty and try to capture Canti, because the robot threatened planetary security. Under normal circumstances, MM facilities—the resident factory—would just observe, but to MM, Canti's capture was more important than observing a treaty.

Therefore, given the emergency situation, it was essential for the Department of Interstellar Immigration to capture Canti before MM could.

Things have gotten pretty hairy.

As he pondered the instability of the situation, Commander Amarao sat in a beauty salon in town. His surroundings were in contrast to the danger of the situation as his head stuck out of a white cloth and a stylist combed his hair.

Communicating through a neck charm, Amarao gave orders to Kitsurubami. "Okay, if we screw this up, then MM is going to get involved for real, so wait until I get there. And whatever you do, don't mess with Raharu—it'll just get even more complicated.

"I have a lot of work to do, so make it a quick cut, please. I want to look good, though—I want to look dignified for a girl I haven't seen in a while… dependable, if you know what I mean."

The latter half of Amarao's speech did not consist of orders to his subordinate, rather directions to the hairdresser next to him.

As Kitsurubami hung up the connection, those incomprehensible

words echoed in her ears. "A girl he hasn't seen in a while?"

She suspected that he was talking about Raharu, also known as Haruko.

She'd wondered why Amarao had made time to go to the hairdresser when they were about to begin battle plans for the urgent situation that had developed—but if the reason was Haruko, Kitsurubami could understand; Amarao was a bit more concerned with Raharu than was absolutely necessary.

According to rumors, he had worked with Haruko before. And then, ever since that girl had showed him her special power, he'd been afraid of her. But it wasn't just Kitsurubami's imagination that underneath his fear, Amarao seemed to have an admiration for Haruko. Most likely, Amarao had gone to the salon in anticipation of finally coming in contact with Haruko again.

Well whatever, Kitsurubami thought. *It doesn't matter to me.*

Still looking through the scope, she refitted the large receiver to her belt in a habituated manner. She didn't use the standard issue one that was designed to look like an ordinary mass-market cell phone, instead preferring to employ this large Russian military-use transceiver. Similarly, the Degtyaryov sniper rifle she wielded was not issued by her organization, rather something she owned because of her own personal hobbies.

Three months earlier, Amarao had been dispatched by the center to be a part of the special immigration team situated in Mabase. And because of that dispatch, the recently admitted Kitsurubami was now able to realize her desire to become a field agent, a wish that derived from her military hobbies.

Guns—those beautiful, heavy, metal machines, cool things that could kill a person and the senselessness in using them… Indeed, her passion for her job didn't came from patriotism or responsibility, but instead from her interest in using military weapons in a real fight.

Her current task was to watch a robot that had escaped from MM.

But if she had intended only to watch, then she wouldn't have brought a personal battle rifle with her.

Amarao had told her to wait until he got there; however, if the robot's body color changed to anything besides blue, then she had been given permission to act as the situation demanded. All it took was a change of color—and she was the only one there. She had plenty of excuses she could use.

She could see that the target robot was hidden in the grass.

While looking through the Degtyaryov's sniper scope with a self-satisfied look on her face, she slowly pressed the trigger.

The enemy bullets attacked endlessly, and Naota was the only one countering. No longer able to tolerate Haruko relaxing next to him, he screamed at her. "What are you doing? Do something! This is a shootout!"

"What's shooting out?"

Haruko lazily pointed the barrel of her Uzi in no particular direction, pulling the trigger. *Rat tat tat* came the dry sound of gunfire.

Then, Haruko saw Kitsurubami aiming for Canti from the top of the bridge.

Several bullets hit the railing of the bridge, right beside where Kitsurubami was stationed. Kitsurubami, who had been about to pull the trigger on her rifle, knew that she had just been threatened with a terrifyingly accurate attack.

Panicking, she looked through the scope in the direction of fire. There was Haruko, looking her way with a bold smile on her face.

Haruko's position was several meters from the bridge where Kitsurubami was, quite a distance farther than the effective range of

an air gun. That meant the gun Haruko had was the real thing; the bullets had hit dead on, burying themselves in the bridge's concrete barricade. Kitsurubami shuddered. She was afraid, not so much of the fact that Haruko had a real gun, rather of the marksmanship that Haruko had displayed. Haruko was not an enemy to be taken lightly.

But when Kitsurubami touched the unfamiliar bullets buried in the barrier, her fear turned to confusion.

They were BB bullets! The things that had managed to get buried into the barrier were small plastic balls for use in an air gun.

What's going on?

Confused by the impossibility of this, Kitsurubami forgot for a moment that she was still holding onto the heavy sniper rifle as she leaned over the bridge railing. The moment she noticed, it was too late: Her world tilted.

"Eh!"

Losing her balance, Kitsurubami fell into the river along with her beloved gun.

Her fall was followed by an "ugh" — the strange yelp of a man. The place where she'd fallen, right into a patch of tall reeds, coincidentally happened to be where the unlucky Kamon was hiding. Kitsurubami had landed right on top of him.

The two rolled into the deep section of the river and were swept away by the fast water current.

Kamon's fighting spirit with regards to survival games was indomitable, though; perhaps his battle spirit even surpassed Kitsurubami's in that respect. So, having suddenly been involved in an accident, even as he was being washed away, he yelled out a parting cheer for his teammate: "I'm leaving the rest to you, TV boooooyyyyyy…"

When it heard its teammate's parting words, Canti jumped out from the grass where it had been hiding to challenge Naota head on. Although Canti was in fact equipped with a laser sight, it had put it away without anyone instructing it to do so, simply having decided that kind of thing wouldn't be chivalrous in today's game. Indeed, it was a robot with sense and reason.

"Damn!" Naota panicked. The enemy had caught him from behind.

Unfortunately for Canti, who was at the point of certain victory, the only thing that came from his air gun was the lonely clicking sound of the trigger. It had run out of bullets after its previous full-on assault.

With this development, the certain victory clearly reversed to Naota.

"Heh heh, I win!" Naota praised himself and turned his guns on Canti.

The robot realized it was in a bad spot and so quickly fled.

It was a "center flag" match, so the game could be decided if someone stole the flag from the middle of the field—but Naota had decided to win by way of the gun, and thus chased after Canti. It seemed he'd discovered the joy of this game as it had progressed.

Elated, Naota chased Canti over the dry riverbed. However, when he turned the corner at a small boathouse…

"Waaaahhhhh!"

Naota was thrown into confusion.

Canti, whom he'd thought was unarmed, ambushed him with a new air gun in its hand.

Having planned meticulously for this battle, Kamon had prepped by hiding guns in that small boathouse. Once again, the tables had turned.

With a loaded air gun right in his face, Naota was up against a wall.

"Timeout, timeout! I said timeout!" Naota yelled. "We get three timeouts."

Upon hearing this new rule, Canti protested unhappily, but without words. *There's no such thing as timeouts*, it seemed to say with its silence.

"Don't give me that look," Naota shot back without hesitation. "Okay! I just made it up right now."

It was at that moment that a three-wheeled truck approached the boathouse from a riverside road and honked its horn.

"Hey, Naota," Naota's classmate Gaku waved from the passenger side. Their classmate Masashi sat in the driver's seat.

What? Naota played it cool, but on the inside, he was surprised. Since when did Masashi start driving that car?

"We're helping at the shop," Masashi said nonchalantly.

"Delivery. Part-time job," Gaku added casually.

No way!

On the truck were the words "Masamune's Sake." Naota knew that Masashi was the son of a sake storeowner; he had even heard that Masashi helped out by delivering goods. But to actually be at the wheel of a truck…

"It's okay! We won't get caught. We only drive beside the river."

Masashi's calm explanation made Naota all the more surprised. *Does he… does he do this all the time?*

"You look pretty cool." A girl's voice spoke.

When Naota looked for its owner, he saw Eri Ninamori relaxing on the back of the truck, sucking on a popsicle.

You're in on this, too? This was behavior unbecoming of the class president.

"But," she asked casually, "it's only a toy, right? Does it shoot bullets?"

When Ninamori had said Naota looked "cool" only a second before, she must have been referring to the air gun Naota was holding. Naota now felt awkward and tried to hide his gun, flustered.

What's going on? he panicked.

His classmates, who were doing really grown-up things like driving a car and working part-time delivery jobs, must have been wondering if Naota Nandaba liked playing war.

Well I don't really like it…

"No, I mean. This is, well, I mean… Oh, Canti… go and get us some drinks."

Trying to cover up the fact that he had been playing with a toy gun, Naota turned to Canti at his side, trying to shift focus to the robot. However, Naota's confused brain didn't really handle this very well, and his attempt to hide his embarrassment became terribly obvious.

The domesticated housekeeper robot launched upward immediately in response to Naota's stammered request.

Canti always had the ability to fly through its gravitational controls —but once again, it had chosen not to use this advantage during the survival game. If there was work to be done, though, the robot would immediately change modes.

Of course, Naota's classmates knew what Naota was trying to do; they could see it as clear as day. But it wasn't as though Gaku, Masashi, and Ninamori were making fun of Naota. They were actually thinking, "Oh, survival game. Looks cool." Naoto's worrying was really just a product of his personal pride, and it came from his insecurity and shame. He wanted to believe that he was more adult than anyone else, cooler than everyone.

When Canti received Naota's order and flew off, it surprised his classmates.

Indeed, Naota had gotten used to living with this robot, so giving Canti orders, like telling it to buy something, had become an

everyday thing to Naoto. But wasn't controlling this robot as he wished so much more amazing than driving a car?

"Did you hear, Naota?" Gaku asked as watched the robot fly off, using an unusually calm tone for Gaku.

"What?"

"The rumors?"

"What rumors?"

Gaku exchanged looks with Masashi at his side. They seemed to be using their eyes to consult with each other about how much they should ask. Ninamori, who kept sucking on her popsicle, quietly glanced at Naota from the side.

Naota felt an eerie mood descend; it felt like there was something that only he didn't know, something that involved him being hidden from him.

"What? What rumors?"

"You know, that satellite thing that happened?" Gaku said. "Everyone is saying that it was you who saved the city. And didn't you interact with the robot that time at the school, too? Everyone's saying you can pilot the robot!"

The time at the school—when they'd been practicing for the class play, a robot had come out of Ninamori's head and run amuck.

Naota already knew there were rumors going around that Canti had crushed that violent robot. It seemed those rumors had grown, and now it was going around that the person who controlled Canti and had resolved the satellite crisis was Naota.

Hmm. It's not entirely untrue, Naota thought.

To be more precise, Naota hadn't used Canti to resolve the satellite crisis; rather, he'd smacked the sphere back with a guitar in his own hands—meaning Naota was more a hero than they thought. And, well, it was kind of true that he had operated Canti; Naota had

become a part of Canti and smashed wild robots twice now. Just as the rumors said, he had operated the robot and saved the city.

However, Naoto had taken a secret pride in the fact that he couldn't disclose these details to people. He knew that no one would've believed him if he'd said, he'd hit a bomb back into space with a guitar during the satellite crisis. But now that those events had entered the realm of rumor, all bets were off.

"Oh, I didn't know you guys knew so much."

"So, you really did save the city then?" Masashi confirmed.

"Really, really?" Gaku was pretty excited. "That's pretty amazing!"

"Well, you know…" Naota beamed proudly.

Yeah, I guess I really am something. The impatience he had been feeling immediately changed to an air of coolness. *I guess I really am amazing.*

But then, with a "hey, hey, hey," Haruko suddenly appeared behind the beaming Naota, embracing him and recklessly grabbing his groin.

"Look, Takkun."

"Hey, stop that. Don't touch me."

"Doesn't it feel good?"

"That's not the point!"

"Hey, we won the game!" Haruko was holding the game flag in her hand. "With this, I'm all Takkun's!"

"I told you not to touch me!"

Seeing this open display of indecency with a minor, Gaku and Masashi could only stare transfixed. They thought to themselves that this housekeeper of Naota's was no ordinary person, after all, but their minds didn't make the connection between this sensual

girl and the light-speed Vespa woman who they had once told scary stories about at school.

"Huh?'

Ninamori spotted a shadow over the embankment. It was a high school girl who was gazing toward Naota and Haruko with a sad air.

Mamimi Samejima.

Haruko noticed Mamimi and waved the flag cheerily. "Hey! Mamimi!"

Having been called to, Mamimi looked perplexed. She had planned to stand there unnoticed, but having been spotted, she had nowhere to run.

Naota also raised his head as he looked up at Mamimi. However, considering he was being embraced by Haruko, Naota felt awkward, as well.

For a moment, Naota and Mamimi met each other's eyes, and then they both quickly looked away.

Chapter 3

What kind of disaster are those three involved in? Ninamori thought.

Having separated from Naota and the others, they were once again driving the Masamune's Sake truck alongside the river.

"Bye! See you in school!" they'd said. "We still have some deliveries to make, so we'd better get going." But the truth was that they didn't really have any work left to do; Masashi simply had the good sense to get out of there.

It was a wise decision. When Mamimi turned up, the atmosphere had become quite uncomfortable.

Ninamori's feelings toward Naota had changed from before, though; even with Haruko and Naota frolicking around in such an indecent manner right next to her, she hadn't felt a thing.

I gave up being the Marquis de Carabas.

During the school play, the reason Ninamori had worn fake glasses over her contact lenses was that she'd wanted to pretend she was a child. In real life, she'd pretended to be an adult, maintaining that appearance with contact lenses. So when she'd worn glasses on stage, she'd actually showed her true face, that of a simple child. That's how Ninamori made sense of it in her head.

In her mind, those who pretended to be grown up were children, so to prove that she had indeed grown up, she'd pretended to be a child by wearing glasses in the school play, it wasn't until a little while after the play was over that she'd realized she didn't have to pretend to be a child.

I really am still a child. When I want to cry, then it's okay to cry. I can enjoy riding in a truck with my classmates. And I can enjoy eating this soda-flavored popsicle as much as I want to.

When she looked at the stick from the popsicle she had just finished

eating, she noticed there was something written on it. Ninamori had bought the popsicle at Masamune's Sake shop, so she extended her hand into the front seat and showed it to Masashi, who was driving.

"Look. I won."

"Oh yeah, you did. Wait a second."

Masashi took a small paper bag out of a box on the front seat, offering it to Ninamori.

"What is it?"

"Free gift. Hope you like it."

Ninamori took out a small item from the paper bag—a water pistol. It was a toy, a water gun made out of transparent green plastic.

"It's pretty."

She smiled and held the water gun up to the sun. It cast a bright-colored, translucent shadow across her face.

With one eye closed, she looked through her newly acquired jewel at the world beyond. The green world spread into the girl's eyes: Green sky. Green clouds. Green river. Through the plastic, everything looked like she was in another world. Ninamori was now on a green planet in another universe.

"That high school girl," Masashi said from the front seat, "that's Naota's brother's girlfriend."

That was news to Ninamori. So, Mamimi Samejima was the girlfriend of Naota's brother, who was playing baseball in America. Somehow, Masashi knew this, as did Gaku.

"But you know," Gaku said, "that maid likes Naota more. That touchy-feely girl *really* seems to like Naota. Naota's, like, popular."

Is that really right? Ninamori thought. Wasn't it dangerous for a high school girl and an adult female to hold special feelings for the same sixth grade boy?

Pointing her water pistol into the sky, Ninamori aimed at the sun and fired.

Well, Haruko and Mamimi both seem pretty dangerous.

Naota drank some canned juice Canti had bought for them. Right after Canti had delivered it, the robot had disappeared somewhere. And then, Haruko, the person who'd created this disaster by calling to Mamimi, also disappeared somewhere. So, now it was just Naota and Mamimi left by the river near Mabase Bridge, the area that had until just a while ago been the scene of the survival game.

Naota was sitting on the bank as he always did. Mamimi was holding Naota's air gun, playing with it while she rambled off nonsense with no train of logic. She seemed to be pretending she was a gunman she'd seen on TV.

"This body here will be the defense, continuing to neutralize the AT field. We have to defend from their dissolving solution. Backup, move down. Withdraw your rifles, and hand to the offense. Now, offense fire together, destroy target… NOW!"

"Don't point it at me; it's dangerous."

"You got the one with bits in it."

Naota was startled. Mamimi was commenting at the can of juice in Naota's hand, having noticed that it was orange juice with pulp in it.

"You've been getting the ones with pulp in nowadays?"

"Well, I don't like the bitter drinks."

"She likes the pulp, too—Haru."

Now that she'd said it, Naota noticed for the first time that he had only drunk canned coffee previously. It was true that he had started to enjoy drinking the pulpy juice that was mixed with bits of fruit only recently… and that it was Haruko's drink of choice. Without

him knowing it, Haruko had made an impact on him—at least, as far as his choice of cold drinks.

"I was watching," Mamimi said. "I was watching."

"You noticed that?"

She must have been talking about the disaster, when Haruko had gotten caught up in animal lust.

Of course, Naota felt a little guilty that Mamimi had seen him messing around like that with Haruko. It had been careless. How much had Mamimi seen? It wasn't as though he had looked very happy about it, had he?

"I don't really think anything about Haruko." Naota's voice sounded apologetic. "Haruko was just really happy and was just jumping all over me; that's what she always does. Well, what I mean is, that's what she's always like; I don't mean that she's always doing that kind of stuff."

Mamimi looked at Naota with sadness—hers was the troubled face of an abandoned cat.

Naota was strangely embarrassed, but also happy. Why? Because a truth had become clear. The reason Mamimi had noticed and been bothered by the pulpy juice was obvious! Mamimi was feeling jealous over him.

Mamimi is jealous! It's tough being so popular, Naota said to himself internally.

"You're really amazing," Mamimi said. "You drove Canti, you hit back the Lord of Fear and saved the city…"

"Oh?"

"Hit back the Lord of Fear and saved the city?"

She must have been referring to when he'd hit the satellite bomb. Mamimi must have known about that, as well.

Indeed, at the time of the incident, Canti had been with Mamimi, and had somehow shown her the same images from Amarao's spy cameras, so Mamimi had seen the whole thing.

"You're really amazing now, Takkun."

"No, it's no big deal…"

Masashi and the others seem to have known, too; perhaps rumors about the whole satellite incident have spread all over the town, Naota thought. Maybe there had been people watching it. *Well, whatever, as long as my success is spreading.*

He was starting to feel very satisfied with himself when Mamimi suddenly approached Naota from behind. She was probably going to cuddle him as always.

Although he knew that it couldn't go on forever, at the moment, he couldn't stop this "play." Ever since Tasuku had left for America, Naota had "played" with Mamimi on this bank, countless times. He wondered how much longer it would go on.

"Ouch!"

In contrast to his sweet expectations, Naota felt a sharp pain at the back of his head. Mamimi had fired the airgun she was holding.

"What are you doing?"

If fired at this close a distance, BB bullets were pretty painful. Naota had been wearing his parka hood, which had protected him from a direct hit. Now, to make sure that the hidden horn wasn't revealed, Naota quickly covered his head with it again.

"Is it Fooly Cooly under your hood again?" Mamimi asked. "Takkun, you're just too amazing. You do furry wurry and lumpy bumpy. When did you become like this, Takkun? It was when Haruko came, huh?"

"Hey, are you…"

I knew it, Naota thought. *I knew it. Mamimi is jealous. This pain in the*

back of my head must be proof that I'm a popular guy.

He looked at Mamimi's lips. Naota didn't know the taste of those alluring lips. Kissing them was the only thing that Mamimi had firmly objected to, that she hadn't let him do.

But those faraway lips could be close so soon. Today. Today, they were going to be his.

Naota grabbed Mamimi's hand. He stood up and pulled her away from the river. "Come on!"

"Don't come near me!"

Finally having managed to stand in a shallow part of the river, Kitsurubami took a small hand pistol from her waterproof holster. The mouth of the gun was directed at none other than the robot Canti, who was standing on the riverbank.

Canti was motionless like a statue, looking straight at Kitsurubami.

I'm scared…

Kitsurubami hadn't been planning to do anything more than snipe at a distance. Now, when unexpectedly encountering the target at close range, she was overwhelmed by the threat, and having almost no real battlefield experience, she instinctively pulled on the pistol trigger. Although all her bullets hit dead on, they merely made dull metallic sounds. The robot's blue body was built with a resistant quality that bullets could not impact.

Kitsurubami had looked through the robot's data file, of course, considering it was her target. She knew that it couldn't be defeated by a pistol's bullets, so she had prepared her favorite anti-tank rifle. But after that lethal rifle had been lost somewhere on the riverbed, she'd had to try feebly attacking it with a powerless pistol to make it clear that she was an enemy.

It was a terrible situation to be in, but it wasn't entirely unsurprising. Although she regarded herself as a fully fledged soldier, Kitsurubami didn't have any formal training. She was simply playing make-believe at being a soldier.

And as she continued frantically pulling the trigger, she quickly ran out of bullets.

The expressionless monitor head of the robot faced her as Canti took a step toward Kitsurubami, who was still standing in the river.

"Argh!"

Fear pierced her entire body. She regretted getting ahead of herself. A strong enemy was closing in on her. Unarmed, she could do nothing but tremble. What kind of vengeance would it take?

Now is the retaliation. I'm done for!

With no hope of escape, she felt weak at the knees. It was hardly noticeable on her wet body, but something warm spread down between her legs. The pistol fell from her fingers and dropped into the river. And Kitsurubami, resigned to her fate, closed her eyes.

"Kitsurubami! Kitsurubami, hey! What happened?"

Amarao was still in the hair salon in town. As he was being shampooed, he was reclining, his body covered by a sheet and his face hidden by a gauze.

"Answer me. Hey, Kitsurubami!

"Hot, hot, HOT!" Suddenly, he screamed in pain. The water they were using to rinse his head was too hot.

Without apologizing, the hairdresser asked him, "What hair color would you like today? Your normal chestnut brown color? Or would you rather Fooly Cooly color?"

It couldn't be! Amarao recognized that stylist's voice. Panicked, he swiped the gauze from his face—and saw Haruko standing there.

"When did you…?!

"Thought the clean cut would make the chicks dig you?"

"What are you doing here?!"

"Thought you'd send your minion to get me?" Amarao jumped up quickly, grabbing his pistol. Then, with one hand, he reflexively checked to see if his eyebrows were still on his forehead.

"Huh?"

Kitsurubami felt her body being carried gently. She opened her eyes.

The robot had lifted her up with its large hands, saving her from the cold river water; now, it was helping her stand up on the bank.

And then, to her surprise, as if to say "sorry," it gently patted her on the head.

Kitsurubami's pulse quickened—but not out of fear. She felt her heart accelerate and her blood warm in an instant.

In truth, the late-bloomer Kitsurubami had dated only three guys up until that point. The first had been an assistant professor when she was attending university. The second had been a workplace romance with a superior. And the other had been a man who'd been fooling around, cheating on his wife; he had wooed her, and then they had started dating. She had finally told the married man she'd wanted to break up, claiming it had been because they went out only when it suited him, but the real reason that she'd broken up with him was because men just weren't enough for her. Now, for the first time, she felt like she understood what men had been lacking.

So gentle.

She felt a mysterious aura, and the warm surge enveloped her.

She touched the silent robot.

This was Kitsurubami's first love.

"That robot is too dangerous."

Aiming his gun at Haruko, Amarao slowly got up from his seat. It was like he was trying to move a wild beast into a pen—gently, so as not to excite it.

Just as Kitsurubami had predicted, the reason Amarao had gone to the hairdresser was to prepare to meet Haruko. The woman he'd told the stylist he hadn't seen for a long time was, in fact, Haruko. Although he had a strong attraction to Haruko, though, she also was a source of fear for him.

"You must have noticed," Amarao said reasonably, "that when the robot turns red, it has some connection with Atomsk. If we don't do something soon, MM is going to make a move. They're ready to destroy this planet."

"So what?"

Just hearing her rude words set off Amarao's primal fear, and he ran outside on impulse. It was no good. He couldn't take her alone.

Seeing their boss running out the building for his life, the subordinates who had been waiting outside the hair salon grabbed their own guns.

"Wait!" Amarao screamed, but his subordinates fired at Haruko when she showed herself at the shop entrance. It seemed all the people who worked under Amarao were lacking in battle experience.

Suddenly being shot at, Haruko smiled boldly and waved some metallic object in her hand.

Amarao and his inferiors watched. In front of their eyes, all the bullets had been cut cleanly in two and were now laying on the floor.

Haruko wore the cruel smile of a carnivorous beast.

The metal object in her hand was a razor that had been on the hair stylist's counter.

Amarao was reminded of how terrifying this woman truly was.

"She's really something."

"She's nothing," Naota assessed Haruko as he pulled Mamimi along by the arm to the front of the station. "She's nothing but an idiot."

"That hurts! Why are you pulling me?"

Naota had kept a tight grip on Mamimi ever since they'd left the riverbank, and she'd complained about it again and again, but Naota hadn't paid attention to her protests at all. It was like none of Mamimi's words reached Naota's ears.

"Seriously, since she came, she's been nothing but trouble. We haven't been able to spend time alone, just the two us, for ages. It was better before."

Today, Mamimi is going to be mine.

That's how much he liked Mamimi—he'd decided the girl he had always been thinking of was going to be his. Naota was excited. Three months ago, he had made a decision about his relationship with Mamimi. He didn't like his position of being his brother's substitute, and he was going to tell Mamimi the truth: Mamimi's ideal partner—Naota's brother, Tasuku Nandaba—already had a girlfriend in America. Naota was going to come clean with the hidden reality.

As a result, even Naota didn't know what would happen to his own relationship with Mamimi. He thought that perhaps all the time they had spent together up until now might mean nothing. He knew that she didn't have any particular attraction to him. Yet Naota came to understand that he couldn't just stay being a substitute. Still, Naota had become stuck on his final decision, and had kept playing around with Mamimi to put it off.

Now, however, the situation had changed: Haruko Haruhara had appeared.

Amid the unpredictable chaos and disaster that had surrounded him ever since she'd arrived, Naota had held on to the ill-defined situation with Mamimi… and bit by bit, something between them had changed.

Probably, above all, he himself had changed, Naota felt. He was stronger. Different from before. Tougher. More manly. He had saved the town. He had grown up, and the world had opened to him. Now, Mamimi was jealous of his relationship with Haruko. Mamimi was in love with him. Now… now, he was going to be able to pursue his relationship with Mamimi.

"How about here?"

Finally, Naota stopped in front of a small coffee shop. Of course, elementary school kids couldn't go into coffee shops unaccompanied. But that was why Naota had chosen a coffee shop. He was going to break the school rules and shatter the stagnant situation, all with one stone. He was going to do today all the things he hadn't done, the things he wasn't allowed to do. He was going to become someone new. His heart was pounding, but he opened the door to the coffee shop, maintaining the pretense of being cool.

"Are we going in?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Why this coffee shop?"

"You came here with my brother, didn't you?"

A coffee shop—a place Naota considered to be where real lovers spent time together and shared real words of love together. If they could spend time here together, then it would mean they were real lovers.

Though Naota's thinking was a bit humorous, the fact was that it wasn't that far from the truth. You might say it was unexpectedly accurate.

By the river, the two of them had played around like lovers— but only when they were on the riverbank. The pair had never had

anything more than a riverbank relationship. Naota had noticed at some point that the riverbank was simply the place where Mamimi spent time with her "substitute" boyfriend. That was part of the reason Naota had brought her to this coffee shop. *Today; we're going to go from a riverbank relationship to a coffee shop relationship.*

But at about this time, Mamimi managed to break loose from Naota's grip. Angrily, she said, "What are you doing?"

"What?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"But don't you—" *like me,* was what he was about to say, but he suddenly got nervous and couldn't say it.

Mamimi looked really angry. She was really angry that he had brought her to a coffee shop. She looked as though she didn't like this.

Naota grew anxious. Was he wrong? Did Mamimi not like him? But then why was she jealous of Haruko?

"This is because of Haru, isn't it?" Mamimi asked.

Naota managed to get a little of his confidence back when he heard that. He'd been right: Mamimi was jealous of Haruko. She did like him. *Yeah, she likes me, so there's no point in being nervous.*

"Don't worry," Naota said. "I'm not involved with her."

"How much do you like Haru?"

"No, I like—"

"Takkun, you like Haru, don't you?"

What are you saying?

Mamimi was looking at Naota sadly. Behind her eyes were thoughts that Naota couldn't comprehend. In the overconfident state that Naota was now in, he wasn't able to understand the meaning of the

loneliness in her eyes.

Mamimi had watched Naota messing around with Haruko on the riverbank with sadness—but it wasn't with a jealous heart as Naota had suspected; Naota had it wrong.

The truth was that, as she'd watched him hit the satellite, Mamimi had seen a certain kind of manliness in Naota. And although seeing something more manly in Naota had improved her opinion of him as a man, it didn't mean that she now desired him. In fact, it was precisely the opposite: Manly Naota was not what she wanted. What Mamimi needed was a substitute Takkun.

Naota had lost interest in being a substitute, but Mamimi didn't need him as anything but a substitute. She didn't need a manly Naota, because to Mamimi, a real man was someone who might throw her away..

Of course, that was Mamimi's made-up logic. It would have been useless to try to explain to Naota.

Mamimi looked down at Naota silently; however, Naota could see only Mamimi's soft lips. There they were, a boy and a girl, each with thoughts not understood by the other.

Naota stood on his tiptoes… Naota stood on his tiptoes, grabbed Mamimi, and tried to kiss her.

But Mamimi turned her face away and refused him.

"What's the matter?" Naota yelled at her. "You like me, don't you?"

The loneliness was in Mamimi's eyes.

And at that moment—*KACHIN!*—the horn inside the hood at the back of his head, the hammer of a double action-type pistol, moved.

The time was 3:32 pm.

With a loud pistol shot, something unnatural fired out from between Naota's eyebrows.

That was the beginning of the massive transformation.

Chapter 4

What had fired out from was not a small thing like a bullet; rather, what flew from his forehead with incredible force was a liquid metal not unlike a jet of water from a fire engine's water cannon.

All Naota's previous strange horns were robots that had used Naota's head as a route, allowing them to pop out from the other side. Those past experiences hasn't been particularly pleasant. Naota expected this one would turn out to be the same kind of humanoid robot as the others, and he prepared himself for that horrible feeling once more.

But… this time things were a bit different from his other extraordinary experiences.

"It's overflowing from Takkun!"

Even Mamimi, who had witnessed such a thing happen before, was sitting down on the ground and staring dumbfounded in amazement. She wasn't incredulous in regard to the incident happening, but she was blown away by the *size* of the incident.

This new projection was already a lot larger than the past robots that had come out, and it just kept on coming from Naota's head with incomparable momentum and speed. The thing was of an unimaginable scale, and it just kept coming and coming, like a never-ending snake firework.

That liquid metallic snake firework soared into the sky above Mabase, where it started to gather into a giant ball before morphing into a particular shape. It was a weird sight, almost like watching a clay model of a skyscraper take form.

And because of its size, the spectacle could be seen from anywhere in Mabase.

At the riverbank, Kitsurubami, who had been doting over Canti, opened her eyes wide with surprise. "What is *that?"*

Engaging his gravitational controls, Canti suddenly floated up and flew off into the sky.

The Masamune truck that Naota's classmates had been driving by the side of the river came to a sudden stopped. Intuitively, Masashi had hit the brakes. The three truck passengers sucked in their breath at the huge shape they saw developing in the sky.

"Let's go take a look," Ninamori said to the boys.

Realizing the danger, the city residents started to evacuate. But a massive blackout, caused the traffic lights to go out on the chaotic roads, resulting in traffic jams near the intersections. People started climbed out of their cars and running—which would've caused a much greater panic if Mabase hadn't been blessed with a small resident population.

In the sky above the chaos, the MM factory siren blared out.

Inside the MM Mabase Factory, a medical machinery site with the exterior shape of an iron that was situated on a large hill in Mabase, a host computer started receiving battle reports.

> *«MMR Class [B].GH manifested in Mabase.*
> *Manifestation configuration M mode. 15:33.*
>
> *Manifestation area is 1600 meters from Mabase plant 15:33.*
>
> *From now, GM mode commences movement on ground through walking 15:33.*
>
> *PS, this is to lure MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK*

15:33.

End 15:33.

Good luck to GH in executing battle strategy 15:33.»

The fluid metal jet kept shooting out, and the giant coagulating structure in the sky continued growing, becoming a towering metal obelisk as it ate up the endless stream.

Amarao and Haruko watched the scene with serious looks on their faces—but Amarao's inferiors fled out of terror.

Still in her hairdresser's uniform, Haruko watched the drama unfold. Needless to say, she knew where that giant snake firework was coming from; the chain link on the bracelet she wore on her left arm was receiving some kind of special energy, reacting like a magnet. It was probably indicating Naota's location.

Finally, the liquid metal stream stopped spewing. It seemed it had all come out, right down to the very last drop. But that enormous fluid thing was stilling changing shape in the sky. What in the world could it be?

When the solidifying body finally finished arranging itself, its true form appeared above the skies of Mabase: Thrusting into the heavens like a giant tower, the monster still had two legs. With the exception of the head portion, its entire body was covered in a thin, gleaming, metallic sheet. It looked exactly like a giant wearing a poncho—or a giant long cactus. Only the two feet at the bottom of the poncho and huge manipulator arms hinted at a humanoid shape. Any way you described it, though, it was absolutely enormous.

The head towered above the tallest building in Mabase. If it was a robot, how was this giant thing going to move?

"Look!" Amarao pointed at the enormous robot and pleaded, "MM is sending those monsters! They're going to destroy this planet! It's over. That's a Class B robot."

But Haruko didn't act at all daunted as she regarded her enemy; she simply took the bass guitar from her back.

Amarao already had lost all his composure. "You're responsible for all this."

"Shut up and watch, Sir Eyebrows." (She meant Amarao by "Sir Eyebrows")

"That guitar is not up to it!"

"You, SHUT UP! You're a hundred years under-evolved, primitive MONKEY!"

"That's derogatory language toward people of developing planets!"

Haruko looked like she was disgusted with this fussing man next to her, and she started to wave her guitar angrily. She made only a light swing through the air as if she were waving a tennis racket, but—

"Uwagh!" As if he had been stuck by an invisible impact, Amarao flew back and landed on the floor. At the same time, those very peculiar eyebrows were torn off his face and sent flying somewhere. Those unnaturally fat eyebrows—which had looked as though they'd been drawn on—actually were thick black stickers.

"My eyebrows!"

When he realized his eyebrow stickers had fallen off, Amarao's face went pale. He went into a panic so frenzied that it was comical. He always had been frightened of Haruko, but now he was so scared that he looked like an herbivore plucked up by the claws of a natural predator. Apparently, those eyebrow stickers were precious to him. He was more shaken by the loss of his eyebrows than by the menace of the enormous robot that had just appeared.

Amarao looked up at Haruko from the spot where he was sitting on the road. When she took a pose with her guitar in hand, his body began to tremble from the fear. "No… you can't!"

"Fooly Cooly Fooly Coola, Fooly Cooly Fooly Coola…"

Haruko suddenly started chanting words like a curse. And as she chanted, she spun the guitar at the ends of her fingers as if it were a cheerleader baton. Then…

Through some incomprehensible technology, the rotating guitar started emitting light, which spread into shimmering particles and scattered through the vicinity. It seemed that Haruko's "dance" was for the express purpose of causing this phenomenon.

Those shining particles surrounded and enveloped Haruko, who hoisted her arms high and closed her eyes.

It was a beautiful, heavenly sight. Haruko's tall, perfectly proportioned body was adorned with countless fragments of light like rays of the sun. She was a miraculous image, like a star in space surrounded by an aurora.

Then, as if reacting to the swirling particles of light, Haruko's body itself started emitting light.

"Ah… No… No!" Amarao groaned. Apparently, he found Haruko's heavenly condition to be utterly terrifying. Even so, he couldn't take his eyes off her newly developed beauty and light.

Finally, what stood in front of Amarao was a transformed Haruko.

How does one begin to explain that new form? Like a peacock spreading its feathers, her new form had the purpose of attracting men, fanning their sexual fantasies. The act of showing bare skin for sex appeal is called "display" in the animal world, and Haruko's new form was, in short, a display.

"Eyebrows… I don't have my eyebrows… Ah, the horn!"

From Amarao's forehead, now without fake eyebrow stickers, a horn had popped out. It was a miniscule horn in the shape of a Y.

The truth was, the reason Amarao had stuck those eyebrow stickers on was to keep this horn sealed in. He had cruel memories of when he'd met Haruko before—and when he'd seen her sexy display, this horn had grown. Vowing that he wouldn't make the same mistake again, he'd plastered those eyebrow stickers to his head.

"Small, as usual." With one finger, Haruko grasped the horn sticking out of the frozen Amarao's forehead. When she pulled out that small, Y-shaped stick, it turned out to be… a small, Y-shaped stick.

"Takkun's is much bigger. Well, I guess I'll try it out, anyway."

Having said this, display-mode Haruko activated the hand-powered generator on the back of her guitar.

"Curses! I've been played like a fool again!" Amarao spat out bitterly. "What does that kid have that I don't?"

When the projection from his forehead finally stopped, Naota was struck dumb as he looked up at the robot that had come out of his own head.

Mamimi was still sitting next to him on the concrete. And the sun having been blocked by the monstrosity, both Naota and Mamimi were encompassed by a giant shadow.

It was like a building, but it was a robot.

GON GON GON…

They could hear complicated mechanical movements from deep inside it.

"It's going to move," Mamimi whispered, still in awe of its size.

And then, the enormous robot took a step and walked. When one of its enormous feet hit the street, the sheer weight of it caused large earth tremors.

Mamimi and Naota were nothing but ants next to that enormous foot.

The enormous robot took one step and then another.

As they supported an incalculable weight, every time its feet met the ground, a boom rang out across the city that was loud enough to shake one's very insides.

The robot made its way farther down that same road, shattering all the windows of every building it passed and trampling over pedestrian walkways. It continued forward unopposed, heading from the city to the hill. It must have been heading for MM Factory.

Amarao watched the enormous robot from where Haruko had left him. "This is bad. It's headed for the plant. It's going to activate the plant!"

Amarao knew what would happen if that enormous robot touched the MM factory. Indeed, this was a situation that threatened the entire human race.

It was at that very moment that a high-speed flying object approached the robot in attack mode.

«Hostile approaching Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood agent. 13:37.

Caution required. Crosscheck with biological reaction reveals that space life form holds the record for fighting with Red Pirate King. 13:37.

Until present time, the biological reaction has been hidden by some method. It has probably been concealed in Mabase. 13:37.

Emergency security measures. 13:37.»

The approaching flying object that soared through the blue sky was Haruko, in display mode, made over in a red leotard suit, high heels, a butterfly tie choker, and bunny ears… in other words, her display-mode transformation had resulted in none other than a bunny-girl outfit! [Ha ha ha ha. Here's where you laugh. I'm

laughing as I write this, so you all should laugh, too.]

Using her signature guitar as a flying surfboard, Haruko zipped through the air like she was sky surfing. And to keep her balance, the flying bunny girl stuck out her butt, which had a bunny tail attached. It was a cute sight.

"DAICON V!" With those cryptic words, Haruko fired the weapon in her hand. Her time-space interference weapon guitar was currently under her feet, so she was using the Y-shaped stick that she'd pulled from Amarao's head as a weapon. By attaching a string to the top end of the Y, she'd turned it into a makeshift slingshot.

Her target was huge, so the slingshot bullets—the bullets she'd fired from those plastic BB guns earlier—all found their target.

And when peppered by those plastic BBs, the gigantic robot suffered damaging blows equivalent to cruise missile strikes. It lost its balance, tipped over, and fell.

Because it was so huge, the buildings it collided into were destroyed, and concrete was shed everywhere. In other words, as a direct result of Haruko's attack, the damage to the town was increasing manifold.

"Look out!"

Next to Mamimi and Naota, wreckage fell to the concrete, including pieces that were the size of cars. If they were hit by debris that size, they'd be beyond saving.

Naota instinctively covered Mamimi in his arms. She was trembling with fear—but she was nothing more than an ordinary high school girl, so it was normal for her to be frightened and trembling when caught up a catastrophe of this magnitude.

Naota was outraged. *Damn! What is this?!* But Naota's rage wasn't directed at the enormous robot destroying the city, rather at the shuddering Mamimi.

In Naota's arms, Mamimi had her eyes shut and was repeatedly muttering as if it were a chant: "Help me, Tasuku, Tasuku, Tasuku…"

For the moment, the rain of debris had stopped. But the fallen robot was getting up again.

Hell, I was the one who saved the city! She knows that! So why doesn't she see how amazing I am?!

"I'm not my brother! Got it? I'm the one who's going to save you!"

Mamimi looked at Naota with a surprise expression that indicated she didn't understand what Takkun was saying.

That made Takkun angrier. *Mamimi, this girl, she really thinks of me only as some pet, as my brother's substitute. She doesn't see me as a man.*

"Look at me. I'm going to save you."

I'm going to save you!

From above them came a violent gust. At some point, Canti had arrived, and it now hovered over Naota's head. Apparently, it had come for its pilot. It was a smart robot.

Good, Naota thought. *This is my opportunity, my chance to show Mamimi how great I am. I'm going to show her that I can pilot Canti and defeat this giant enemy.*

With that resolve, Naota shouted as loud as possible: "CANTI!"

As ordered, the robot landed next to Naota, and its abdominal area opened up wide like a cockpit hatch.

Naota looked at Mamimi and asserted, "You got it? I'm Naota. Never call me 'Takkun' again!" And then, he jumped inside Canti.

As soon as the gap closed, the robot's body changed to a crimson color.

"Uraagh!" Not letting up, the bunny-outfitted Haruko let loose another slingshot barrage.

The bullets once again found their target—but with just a slight shift in stance, the robot was able to easily withstand the slingshot bullets that had caused such an impact earlier.

At some point, the metallic sheet poncho that covered the robot's body had changed color subtly, and the slingshot bullets probably had stopped working because of something to do with that.

MM used a seventh generation alloy in the bodies of its products, the culmination of human-subject testing wherein the alloy had been transplanted into joints, organs, blood, and living bodies. The final product was a miraculous metallic material than could become plasticlike and, in response to neutrino signals, could change into several patterns based on heat, electricity, conductivity, insulation, acid resistance, luster, solidity, catalysis, and mass. It was the same type of metal that made up Canti's body, allowing it to change color.

When the giant robot had taken Haruko's first attack, it had instantly devised a countermeasure based on the weapon's makeup, sending the data to its covering sheet.

"Drat." Realizing that it was having no effect, Haruko threw away the weapon in her hand without a second thought.

Conversely, the enormous robot had taken what looked like a handgun from under its sheet. Although the weapon held by the arm manipulator was in the shape of a gun, because of its size, it was more like a missile launcher, with a gun barrel that measured almost two meters wide.

Surprisingly quick on the trigger, the giant took aim and fired at the soaring Haruko. Twice. Thrice. The gunshots shook the air above the city, but they did not hit. Haruko's movements were just a little faster. And aiming at her was much like trying to shoot a fly with a gun.

"Heh, you suck." Haruko laughed boldly, but without a weapon, all she could do was run away. Just when she thought she would have to call for her Vespa, the bracelet on her left arm started to react again.

Something red was flying her way—Canti.

"Just my luck!" Haruko approached and leapt on top of Canti in midair; then, she took the guitar, which had been under her feet until now, in her hands. It was the guitar-shaped time-space interference weapon, an ideal choice in this situation.

The robot swiftly aimed for the approaching bunny girl riding on top of Canti; it fired, but could not hit because of the nimble, zigzagging flying maneuvers. Haruko had been amazing, but with its ability to close in and dodge bullets, Canti's flying skills were godlike.

Is that Takkun? Mamimi wondered as she watched this battle. *Is Takkun really piloting that?*

When they reached a close range, Haruko jumped from Canti's back. Her bunny ears streamed against the sky. She then fearlessly landed on the gun that the giant robot was holding—or rather, she landed on its barrel. Using the momentum of the speeding Canti, she had leapt over fifty meters.

Haruko calmly ran up the robot's manipulator arm and unleashed a blow on its chest area with all her strength.

White sparks flew out and the smell of ion filled the air.

Haruko kicked off the robot's body and retreated, placing the guitar underneath her feet, and once again sliding through the air as though riding a surfboard. With one guitar alone, she'd been able to engage in full aerial combat.

Haruko's attack did not result in victory, though. Indeed, the sheet area around the spot she'd hit had burned away, but that was all. The opponent was simply too large.

As Haruko tutted, Canti, who had been circling around, signaled

with its thumb as if to say *my turn to attack*.

In midair, Canti transformed into a crimson cannon, its autonomic gun mode. Apparently, judging that there was no way to miss an opponent of that size at that distance, it didn't even use its laser sight, instead firing immediately. Of course, the result was a direct hit. Though the robot avoided getting pierced straight through by the bullet, it sustained heavy damage this time, staggering backward. The strike seemed be have been effective.

The unleashed bullet changed direction and, as always, returned back to Canti's gun barrel. It was a recyclable bullet.

Without a moment's hesitation, Canti fired again.

However, the giant robot also aimed its gun, firing as it was falling down.

The two weapons made simultaneous blast sounds, and then the two bullets collided in midair. They both had been unleashed at the same exact angle and with the same exact timing. There was an instant explosion, obliterating the bullet the giant robot had fired. While that bullet scattered to fragments, Canti's bullet, having been knocked off course, slammed into the side of a building close to where Mamimi was. Though the impact wasn't enormous, it still caused concrete debris to scatter across the vicinity.

Despite that, Mamimi continued to stand in place, without dodging the debris, transfixed by the bullet that was buried into the wall.

Its cannon mode having failed, Canti returned back to humanoid

form and continued flying. It seemed it didn't have spare bullets, having always recycled that one shot. When it lost its one bullet, the cannon was no longer of any use.

However, bright light started spewing forth from Canti's face monitor. Then, from the face of that shining monitor, a protrusion appeared. Canti gripped the horn coming from its face and quickly pulled it out.

"That's…" From where she'd hid on a rooftop to shield herself from the blast, Haruko saw the protrusion coming from Canti's monitor. She watched in shock.

It was a guitar. No, it was probably the same as Haruko's—a guitar-shaped superweapon. But they way it differed from hers in shape was what made Haruko unable to believe her eyes.

"A Gibson EB-0!"

This was the first time she'd been this surprised since coming to Mabase.

Watching the battle unfold, Amarao also was shocked when he saw Canti's weapon. It seemed the weapon Canti had pulled out was highly recognizable for everyone involved.

With a stunned expression on his eyebrow-less face, Amarao whispered, *"It's him. It's the real Pirate King."*

With the guitar in hand, the crimson Canti took off like a flash—Land in the next instant, it swung into the giant robot's body. It was a magnificent, lightning-quick attack, with beautiful, elegant movement.

The belly of the giant robot flew up, and its internal parts scattered through the sky. It seemed that Canti's one hit had destroyed it,

because it no longer made any response, and the sound of its internal machinery ceased completely. Its balance controls must have stopped working, as well, because as it flew back, it flipped and went completely upside down.

Just barely grazing the tops of civilian homes, what used to be the head of the robot sank into ground and caused a local earthquake.

And then, the sheet that had covered its entire body dropped.

It was a warm gaze. With flush cheeks, Haruko looked up at the brave figure of crimson Canti. Haruko Haruhara had become a simple girl in love with the one she loved right in front of her.

The girl whispered the name of her beloved: *"Atomsk."*

The truck that Gaku, Masashi, and Ninamori were riding in finally reached the area where the action had unfolded. And because all the adults had been thrown into complete panic, there was nobody to stop the children for operating a vehicle without a license.

When they came across Mamimi, she was still staring at the side of the building. And when they turned their gaze in the direction of hers, they also became captivated by the bullet that had sunken into the side of the building.

The embedded bullet slowly peeled away from the wall and fell to the earth, making a heavy sound on the asphalt.

That "bullet" was Naota Nandaba.

As the cellular stiffening mode dissipated, Naota sprawled out untidily in that place, his eyes still closed. From his light breathing, they knew he wasn't dead.

Mamimi muttered, "Looks painful."

The MM factory on top of the hill spewed out white smoke. Usually, this was only momentary, but today, the gushing did not stop. Mabase was immediately enveloped in that smoke, reducing the field of vision.

And within that mist, a large, eerie shadow became visible. As the upside-down sheet peeled off, the entire giant robot was revealed—and what appeared within the mist was a giant hand.

Chapter 1

"Today, we're all going to learn how to use chopsticks."

The school lunch menu that day at Mabase Elementary School was rice and mushrooms, and Miyaji was using this as an opportunity to instruct them on the correct way to hold chopsticks, a plan that must have been decided in the staff meeting that morning.

However, Miyaji couldn't seem to use chopsticks very well herself, so she was finding it doubly hard to teach. From the way she held her own chopsticks, it appeared that she'd grown up handling them the wrong way, by crossing the sticks—but to set an example for the students, she'd tried to correct herself quickly, all while attempting to maintain the respect of her students. Perhaps this was her way of giving her all to something that had come back to haunt her after she'd grown up enjoying her incorrect method.

Naota, however, was not showing even the slightest indication of interest; he was daydreaming and gazing out the classroom window. Recently, he hadn't been speaking much, instead spending most of his time staring out the window at the world outside, which was shrouded in a thick fog.

Since that memorable day, the white smoke had become like a fog and settled, covering the city of Mabase without any sign of clearing. Coming out of the center of that fog, you could see the imposing robotic hand, which the people in town called "the towering hand."

The giant hand extended from the earth upward, as if it were trying to grab the heavens themselves. And considering the robot the size of a building was in actuality one giant hand, its size was unparalleled. That hand was on the same scale as the MM factory, which it was situated next to on a large hill.

On a morning ten days earlier, the day after the incident, their homeroom teacher, Miyaji, had instructed them to make sure they didn't get close to the hand that towered near the factory, which

only the day before had been a violent robot.

That warning—similar to the ones given when a typhoon was coming—was the only reference made to the towering hand at school; no other explanation was given.

But that towering hand near the MM factory was far, far, far more dangerous than a typhoon. In fact, it had the potential to be more destructive than a nuclear meltdown. The residents didn't know this scary truth, and so had not evacuated, instead continuing to live in Mabase. That was because the public authorities were skillfully working to manipulate information.

And so the school children went to school as normal, and now it was mealtime. It was truly reckless.

"Naota, do you want to help out with the part-time job?" Masashi called out. He was talking about his part-time job making deliveries with his truck.

"It's pretty nice," Ninamori said. "Next month, I'll be able to buy a new computer game."

But Naota had no interest in his friends' invitation; he stood up, tray in hand, as if being spoken to had been annoying.

"Hey, Naota…" When Gaku saw the plates on Naota's tray, he was surprised; his classmate hadn't touched his food at all, having left all his mushrooms and rice.

It was a school rule that students weren't allowed to waste food. But Naota was permitted to leave the classroom, anyway, satisfying Miyaji by saying that he wasn't feeling very well.

"Why didn't Naota eat anything?" Gaku puzzled.

"He couldn't eat it," Masashi said.

There were people who lost their appetite when they had a big responsibility, and Masashi knew that Naota was that kind. That was why he had invited him to take part in the part-time job—ever since that incident, Naota had been locked away inside himself.

The robot that he had boasted about controlling had been using him as a bullet. Though that was pretty amazing in itself…

Masashi thought that Naota held an unusually high ideal for his self-image.

For a while, his friends gazed worriedly at the door through which Naota had just left.

After leaving the classroom, Naota stood in the corridor, staring out at the outside world with a blank expression.

He really had no appetite anymore. He had an empty stomach, but he didn't have any desire to eat. Furthermore, no matter how much he ate, he wouldn't be able to fill the sense of loss he was feeling now.

The town was full of the white mist coming from MM Factory. Day and night, the white smoke came pouring out, covering the city.

I knew it, Naota thought. *I always knew the white smioke was at fault for taking all the color from the world. It's the bringer of nothingness, changing everything in the world to gray.*

Even if he looked straight up, he could no longer see blue sky, just overcast white fog. It had enveloped the town as if there was nothing existing in the outside world. Maybe there really was nothing outside this town. Maybe this place was a little island floating in another dimension. If so, that meant Naota always would be stuck in this place with his feeling of loss.

But then, where had they gone, the housemaid and the stupid robot? After the incident, Haruko and Canti disappeared from the Nandaba home, and the family hadn't heard from the two since.

But that was to be expected, perhaps. The duo were wanted fugitives now. There were posters with their photos posted up on the bulletins and walls in the town, all declaring that the whole incident with the giant robot had been their fault.

In the underground war room of the Department of Interstellar Immigration, Amarao and his subordinate, Kitsurubami, were watching a monitor that was displaying the giant towering hand next to the MM factory.

At that moment, the computer terminal display Kitsurubami was operating displayed the central department's analysis report. They finally had data with specification for the towering hand, which had been compared against data from other MM robots.

Kitsurubami whispered as she read the report, *"It really is a hand."*

"A hand."

The first answer from the analysis results said that it was a giant manipulator, and Amarao had responded angrily because they'd already known that. In fact, he had already worked out what the hand was for.

That MM factory on top of the hill… the residents of Mabase were well used to seeing it now, this factory that looked like an iron. It was unavoidable. However, what would their reaction be if they were to find out it wasn't a factory that looked like an iron, rather an iron that looked like a factory?

The meaning of the towering hand became obvious then: It was an enormous hand for an enormous iron. The iron-shaped building even had a proper handle; in other words, the hand had a place to grab the iron.

"Is it going to grab it?"

"I think it wants to grab it."

"It's so obvious, huh? I mean, it looks exactly like an iron."

"Yep, it really was an iron all along."

It was an incredibly dangerous situation, but Amarao and his team had been saved by the propaganda—or the successful manipulation

of information that stated there were two criminals who had looted in-development MM machines and run wild with them.

The petrified giant machine is not of an explosive nature, nor does it pose any radiation risk. MM is accepting responsibility and compensating the town's victims. The criminals are now on the run.

That "criminal" pair was Haruko and Canti. Amarao's team had set them up, of course, to hide any government involvement. However, that concealment had its limits. If this towering hand moved, then the propaganda creators would not be able to escape the finger pointing.

They had to do something—and soon.

The analysis report continued. One of the monitors held a freeze-frame of the moment when Canti had beaten though the giant robot with a guitar, along with an image of one of the internal components the towering hand had shed—but even when they zoomed in on that picture and applied a CG touch-up, the object wasn't very clear.

Regardless, Amarao's team knew what the part that had flown out was. Finally, they had some useful information: The analysis results in the central office confirmed their suspicion.

"If that's the terminal core that controls the giant robot, then that explains why it hasn't moved."

The so-called "terminal core" unit was like an electronic brain that controlled the MM robot. Furthermore, the report noted that, due to significant differences in the electronic nerve center of this robot, an alternative would not work.

In other words, there was no concern that MM might get another one to move the hand, and that gave them some options for negotiating with MM.

"We have to make finding the terminal core our main priority," Amarao ordered his subordinates. And the war room went on red alert.

After school, rain started coming down, but it didn't clear away the clouds. Instead, the rain clouds and the mist mixed together to make a solid gray block.

Naota was at Mabase Bridge, on the way home from school. He pressed the canned black coffee button on the vending machine, and as he reached into the inset where the can dispensed, he spotted Mamimi under the bridge.

Although it was pouring rain, Mamimi was not carrying an umbrella, as usual. Already, her clothes and hair were soaking wet and sticking to her body, but she didn't care; she was focused on peering into the long grass. She was probably looking for that stray cat she had called Takkun.

"I never carry an umbrella."

"What do you do when it rains then?"

"I don't mind getting a little wet."

As he thought back on a conversation they'd had before, Naota yanked on the pull ring of the canned coffee.

Mamimi had left him in front of that coffee shop. Mamimi had refused Naota's kiss. They hadn't seen each other even once since.

Masashi, Gaku, and Ninamori—who were walking home together with Naota from school—also noticed the rain-soaked Mamimi.

"Hey, look over there." Gaku pointed to her. "Isn't that Naota's wife?"

Naota had wanted to show Mamimi that he could pilot Canti, and that he was a man now. But in truth, Naota had been nothing more than a bullet. Now that Mamimi knew as much, Naota wondered what she thought of him.

Naota told himself that Mamimi didn't matter anymore; then, leaving his classmates there, he walked off alone.

"Hey Naota, is it okay to leave her out there?" Gaku called out.

Silently, Masashi had watched Naota go. But as she gazed down at the rain-drenched Mamimi from under her umbrella, Ninamori wore a complicated expression. The cat that Mamimi was looking for was in Ninamori's house now; Ninamori was looking after it.

Sorry, but it was your fault…

Last week, if Ninamori hadn't taken the cat home, it would have died. It would have most definitely starved to death. Ninamori had come across the freezing cat cowering in the rain. When she'd picked it up, she'd found it had injured one of its legs, and its skinny body was convulsing. It didn't even have the energy to cry out. And when she'd realized it was the cat that Mamimi always was carrying around with her, Ninamori had become angry. She'd immediately decided that she would take care of it herself.

"I'm sorry, it doesn't matter how much you look; you're not going to find it. That cat is at my house now. It's my cat. If you pick up a cat, then you have to look after it properly. You can't just do things by halves," Ninamori whispered to herself.

Not knowing any of this, Mamimi continued looking for the cat along the riverbank in the rain.

Naota, who had walked ahead sulkily, suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. No one was there, but when he heard the sound of a scooter approaching, Naota's grumpy, sulky face suddenly filled with anticipation.

Could it be?

A scooter came to a sudden stop behind Naota, employing its emergency brakes. Right behind him, the scooter stopped.

It stopped right behind me.

Instinctively holding his breath, Naota turned around, and there on the scooter… was Amarao.

Naota, obviously disappointed, took a sip of the black coffee.

Idiot, what were you hoping for?

"You've already grown up, so you drink the bitter stuff," Amarao said. "Your brain needs glucose. If your brain is to get back to normal, it's better to drink the sweet stuff. You must be pretty tired of it now. Every time something jumps out of the N.O. in your head, it causes trouble. N.O. is a technology that uses the pulses between the left and right brain to cancel each other out and open a hyperspace channel. I don't think your housemaid is going to be coming back… but just in case."

Amarao took out a small paper bag from the pocket of the coat he was wearing, and he offered the bag to Naota, who found two black stickers inside. The pair looked exactly like Amarao's eyebrows.

"Do you know why Raharu got close to you? Oh, Raharu is your housemaid—that's her real name. She's after Atomsk. They say that he is so skilled with N.O. that he can steal whole star systems. It was about a year ago that he fell into the hands of MM. Raharu is after him, and so came to this planet. She's in love with him."

Naota couldn't understand half of what Amarao was saying, but the final thing he'd said hit Naota hard: *"She's in love with him."*

Naota silently walked away, ignoring Amarao.

It was raining that day, too, when several children holding umbrellas gave chase. Takkun was a small weak kitten and couldn't run away. The chasing children looked like ordinary elementary school kids, but they were actually demons, residents of the demon town Endsville.

That day, the other girls in her class had been teasing Mamimi again, and her shoes had been washed away in the river in the aftermath. For Mamimi, whose feet were small, it was always difficult to find pretty shoes that would fit her. She'd just bought some she liked, but now they'd thrown them into the river, saying

that the style was against school rules.

Walking along the street without shoes was pretty pathetic. Mamimi's feet got hurt easily. But as soon as she'd seen the kitten being chased around by the kids, she'd run over barefoot and picked it up. And she had glared at those little demons.

If those kids teased Takkun again, then she was going to do a whole lot more than just stare at them: She would hit them with rocks, that's what Mamimi decided. As if she should care about them. They were demons.

"Takkun, where have you been?"

She had been searching for almost two hours for him. The wind blew off the river, chilling her. Even though the rain had finally ended, her soaked clothes stole away her body heat. Tired, she put a cigarette to her mouth and lit it.

She'd finally started to consider the possibility that maybe someone else had taken him in. Mamimi couldn't have pets at her place; if they'd had the money, then they would have moved straight away to a place where you could have pets—but that just wasn't possible now. And Takkun was a cute black kitten, so it wouldn't be too surprising if someone else were to pick him up to look after him. But that meant she couldn't have Takkun anymore, which upset her. Mamimi was really upset, because she needed a Takkun.

If I don't have Takkun, then I'm all alone.

At some point, Mamimi took her cell from her bag. There was only one number in the phone directory displayed on the tiny screen, Tasuku's number, in America. That was Mamimi's last link to Tasuku.

Of course, Mamimi had given Tasuku her number, too, so she always made sure to carry her cell with her. However, she had never once received a call or text from him. The phone had not rung once. She already knew that Tasuku was never going to call her.

Since Tasuku had gone to America, Mamimi had not called his number once, either. That was a number that she could never call herself.

"Well, see you sometime, Mamimi. Get yourself a nice boyfriend!" Tasuku had said to her, smiling as he departed the city.

She understood what he'd meant.

So, it didn't matter if she carried around the phone. It would be better just to get rid of it. But because she carried it, she was still attached. They were linked. *Still… maybe*, she thought, *maybe, just maybe this will be the moment it rings. Maybe I'll get an international call—*

"Hey, it's me. I'm fine. I don't like it here. No good girls here. You really are the one for me. I'm coming home next week, and I'm really looking forward to seeing you. I've bought you so many gifts."

How long have I been waiting? I'm an idiot.

It was then that something weird appeared in the river—a small machine, in the shape of a small, four-legged table. It walked around on those four legs like an animal, and it was about the size of the palm of a human hand. It had crawled from the river about two meters from where Mamimi was.

Filled with interest, Mamimi crouched down next to it, and that machine looked at her, too. Mamimi and that weird machine stared (if it could stare?) at each other.

Thinking how cute it was and wondering what it was, Mamimi blew out a puff of tobacco smoke.

When she did that, the machine sucked in some of Mamimi's expelled smoke and started to move around, delighted. *Clink clank.* The machine used its legs to roll around by Mamimi's feet.

Not knowing what to do, Mamimi watched it for a little while.

"You're an energetic little thing."

It was then that the machine, which had been, innocently moving in circles, suddenly jumped up at Mamimi and stole her cell phone. Perhaps it was going to play with it and kick it around like a small dog. Part of the phone was in its mouth.

Then, it opened its mouth wide and attempted to eat the cell phone.

"Tasuku's number! No! Stop that!"

Instinctively, Mamimi restrained it. The robot unexpectedly listened to her orders, and with its mouth still wide open, stopped exactly where it was. It looked like it was begging.

That had been close. That phone was the only place that she had Tasuku's number saved. If she lost it, then she would lose her link to Tasuku; he wouldn't be able to call her anymore.

Call me anymore…? Mamimi stopped to ask herself. *Even if I carry this phone, is he going to call me?*

Was he going to call her?

The link with Tasuku, this thing, gone… She'd never really had it in the first place.

When she looked back down, the robot was still standing there innocently, its mouth wide open, waiting for Mamimi's next order.

"You can have it," Mamimi said.

The robot must have been hungry, because it chomped down greedily on the phone at first—but then it began carefully chewing and swallowing.

"You're responsible then," Mamimi said. "I'll call you Takkun."

Chapter 2

Outside, it was as dark as if it were already nightfall. The autumn sun set early.

In the dullness of his unlit bedroom, Naota stared out the window from his bed.

On the balcony, the fog and the darkness of the night created a thick mass. It was like the bottom of the sea, dark and unreachable by the sun, Naota thought. *A prisoner, trapped by water pressure. That's what I am now.*

He heard the sound of a passenger jet flying high above the city. *Perhaps that's a boat on the surface of the sea. They don't know about me, trapped in this underwater colony, and those tourists are probably traveling to some faraway land, a world outside that I don't know.*

Naota lay on the bed face up. He was sleeping on the bottom bunk, so he could see the base of the bunk above him, the place where his brother Tasuku had slept until recently.

The people who had disappeared from Naota's life…

Leaning against the bed was the guitar, the one that had been pulled out of Naota's head when the satellite had descended.

She had smiled and told him it was his bat, and then she had left this petrified city. Where had she gone?

Getting up from the bed, Naota picked up the guitar and tried playing a chord. The single tone resonated across the bottom of the deep sea floor.

Finally, his father's voice called to him for dinner, and Naota descended the stairs. But when he entered the room, he instinctively stiffened and yelled.

"Aaah!"

It was her. There.

Who? The Vespa girl, of course!

"Hey." Haruko was sitting at the table calmly, looking entirely innocent; for some reason, she was wearing a colorful lei around her neck, looking like a Hawaiian tourist.

"You!" Naota's voice was shrill. "What are you doing here, acting like nothing has happened? You're a fugitive!"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Kamon started to explain. "I let her take a vacation so she could go on a six day celebrity holiday to gorgeous Hawaii."

Over the past few days, investigators had come to the Nandaba house a number of times, asking about Haruko's whereabouts. Each time, Kamon had replied coldly that she had nothing to do with the people in that house. Even though he'd said he liked her before, as soon as the police had come, he'd acted like she was a stranger. Naota had been enraged over how selfish adults could be.

But now it seemed that Kamon hadn't been writing Haruko off, rather had known her whereabouts and kept the information hidden. It was a staggering realization for Naota: From the way Kamon was talking, he had definitely known where she was when she'd left the house.

"Look, Haruko brought us gifts from Hawaii." Shigekuni was currently showing Naota one of the presents she must have given them, a wooden bear with white chocolate. It was a common souvenir.

No, wait a second, Naota thought. *A wooden bear? White chocolate?*

"That's not from Hawaii!"

"Next time, I want to go with you," Kamon said, drawing close to Haruko.

"Hawaii chocolate really does have a different taste, doesn't it?" Shigekuni bit into the white chocolate with a very pleased expression.

The two of them were so elated by Haruko's return home that they weren't listening to Naota at all.

"Next time I go," Haruko said, "I want it to be just me and Takkun."

"What?!" Shigekuni and Kamon cried out together in dismay.

Naota was still standing frozen in place when Haruko took his hand and suddenly pulled him to her. She hugged his head to her chest and then, as usual, started rubbing his head up and down her.

"I'm not going anywhere with you! Stop that! It hurts!"

"You're blushing!"

"I wish she'd rub me up and down like that," Shigekuni muttered, looking jealous.

That really hurts.

Naota finished his dinner early and then got into the bath. In the bathtub, he touched his head where it had been rubbed against Haruko.

That hooligan!

From the window, he could hear laughter—Haruko, Kamon, and Shigekuni in their drunken revelry. Considering they were a wanted fugitive and people harboring said fugitive, Naota felt the adults in his house had lost all sense of the crisis and themselves.

"They're so loud," he complained, but Naota's expression contained a happiness it had not over the past few days.

It was deep in the night when, after having caused as much chaos as she could during their drinking spree, Haruko came into Naota's room as if everything were completely normal. When she turned out the light, she climbed up onto the top bunk as if her past few days' disappearance had never happened.

Of course, the top bunk was her place, but it still disturbed Naota, who was on the bottom bunk with his eyes closed but not yet sleeping.

He couldn't fall asleep. Haruko was in his room now, in bed right above him. It was such a small thing, but that alone seemed like a miracle to Naota.

Naota whispered in a low voice, *"Are you asleep?"*

Haruko didn't reply, though; he could hear only the sound of her gentle breathing. She must have fallen asleep straight away; she must have been really tired.

"Who on Earth are you?" Naota muttered half to himself. "Where did you come from really?"

"What's this?" Suddenly, Haruko popped her head out from the top bunk above and looked down at Naota.

"What, you were awake?!"

"Did you think you could confess your love for me while I was sleeping?"

"Idiot, of course not!"

"You're blushing."

He was annoyed by her smile, so he frowned at her. "Why did you come back?"

"For you, Takkun."

"Liar."

"Hey, should we do it?" Haruko lowered her voice.

"What?"

"C-P-R."

"You do it all the time, don't you?"

"Not that, the *real* thing—the adult thing, the amazing thick one."

"Stop with the thick."

Haruko had jumped down from the top bunk and was leaning over Naota in his bed, her face right up to his. In the middle of the darkness, Haruko's face was coming straight for him—her breath, the feeling of those sensual lips.

I can't. This is nothing but Haruko's usual mischief. I can't do this on her terms.

As she watched Naota's confusion with the bold look that was always on her face, Haruko smiled gently for some reason. Then, she murmured, "Do you want to come with me? Throw everything away and come away with me?"

Naota didn't know where she meant, but he didn't need to ask. He knew Haruko was inviting him to go to a world outside this one, somewhere not here. That was the place Naota had been dreaming of for so long.

"Why are you being so nice?"

"Takkun, you're still a kid."

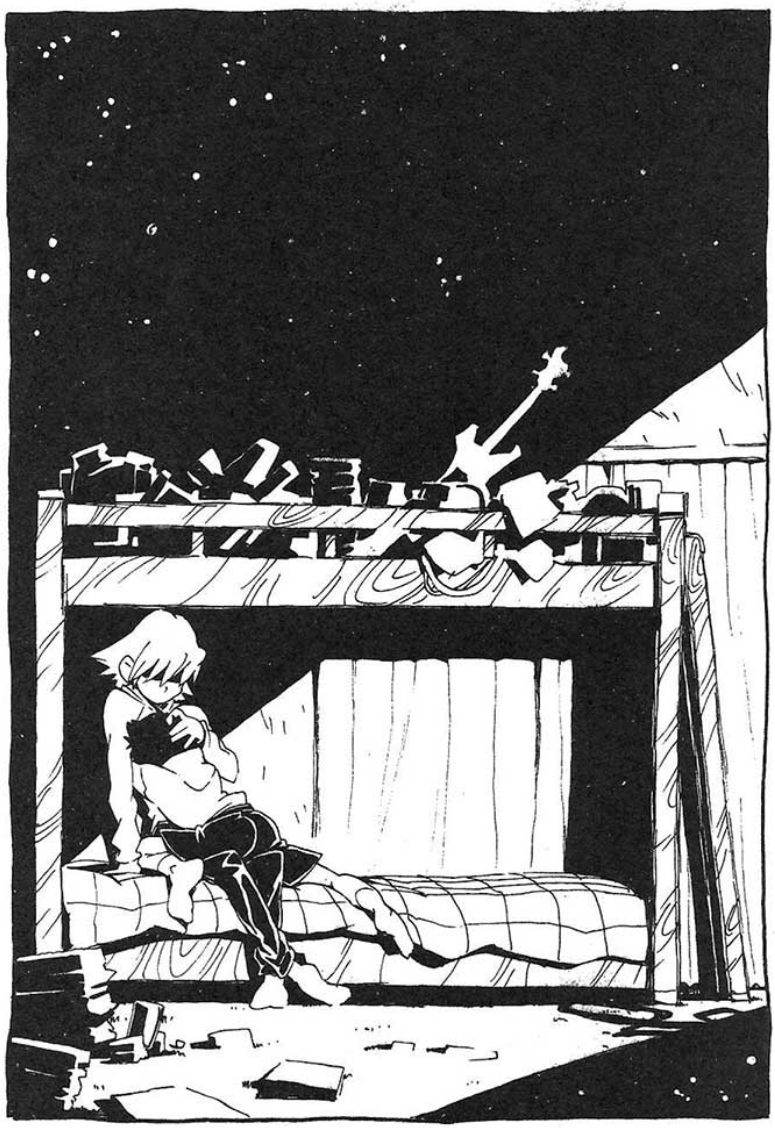
Naota surprised himself when, in the next moment, he pushed himself with all his might against Haruko's chest. He clung to her, buried his face in her, and wept.

"Where did you go? You disappeared all of a sudden!"

When was the last time, Naota thought*, I cried like this? I haven't cried for such a long time…*

Haruko quietly comforted the crying Naota.

The suffocating feeling he'd been experiencing wasn't just about the town, it was about his heart, about discovering that it was only an illusion that the everyday things in front of you were the best things could get, about the loss of imagination and possibilities.



In this town covered with white mist, the feeling of being trapped had been eating away at Naota. Gradually, he had even started to forget there was another world. He had tried to get used *to an ordinary world, where nothing amazing happened. But,* Naota thought*, then Haruko came. She's here, hugging me now, so I won't forget that*

there is a world beyond this place.

A week after that moment, Miyaji was training her students to high jump in the schoolyard of Mabase Elementary. It was a PE lesson of course. Since the day before, the students had been fired up as they'd tried to clear the bar at a height higher than they'd been able to jump before. Ninamori, Masashi, and Gaku were there in their gym clothes; Naota, however, was not present.

Since the day Haruko had returned, Naota hadn't come to school once.

"I wonder when he's coming back," Ninamori said.

"It's bad, huh?" Masashi sighed.

"What's bad?"

"It's bad. I heard Miyaji is going over to his house tomorrow. But he's not there, either."

"He ran away?"

"Could he—" Gaku chipped in, "Could he have eloped with that touch-feely older girl?"

"It's bad."

"But…" *But,* Ninamori thought, *if he had the courage to do something like eloping, then he's probably fine*. The troubles that Naota had in his heart were something that, in the end, only Naota could understand. But she thought she could guess at what those troubles felt like—being trapped in a labyrinth with no exit, wandering aimlessly with no hope of rescue. Ninamori had passed through that labyrinth herself, so she knew there was a way out. You simply had to cry. You merely had to examine what was weighing on your mind. You had to stop pretending to be a grown up.

Ninamori had cried to her parents. The day before the school play, she'd acted like a child—no, like a child should act. She'd stamped

down her foot and then broken down into tears, telling them how she felt.

Naota would be okay if he cried to someone, too, Ninamori thought. Even if he didn't come to school. Not coming to school wasn't a big problem.

Naota was with Haruko. Ever since she'd returned, he'd been skipping school and hanging out with her. For entertainment expenses, they'd simply been getting by with Naota's meager allowance—or with Haruko's bold personality (she didn't hesitate to run out of a restaurant without paying).

Naota had never imagined this feeling of freedom he now possessed. None of his summer vacations could match the pleasure of the past few days. It truly was a special season.

They had been in all-night cinemas. They had made big wins at the horse races; then, they'd lost it all on the next race, but they'd laughed happily about that, too. They had spent a day at a hotel pool. And at night, they'd stretched out their legs at a baseball stadium and watched a real professional ballgame. And although Naota was just a school kid, he had been to some shady places that it wouldn't be fit to mention in a publication like this, and had some very daring experiences there.

But it didn't matter what dangerous places they went; because he was with Haruko, he felt safe. It was the same as the thrill he'd felt when he'd snuck out with his brother one night to watch a fire.

There was even a day when they'd had to evade the pursuing police after violating the speed limit with two people riding the Vespa. That day, in fact, two patrol cars and a police motorcycle had smashed into the barrier and crashed. As usual, though, Haruko, hadn't concerned herself with such small matters.

Today, they were standing on top of a tall hill in front of a convenience store, eating cup ramen.

Mabase was enveloped with smoke as usual. Due to the smoke, the sun looked like a lazy giant red king in the west.

Haruko took a bite of her ramen and made a disgusted face.

"Yuck."

"I told you so," Naota said, satisfied. "The regular stuff is always safer than the new stuff."

At the convenience store, Naota had chosen a brand he'd eaten frequently, but Haruko had made straight for the new stock lined up in the shop. Naota had predicted that it would probably be disgusting, and it seemed he'd been right.

Haruko pouted over her bad luck in choosing it, and then she screamed, "Change!" and forcibly exchanged hers for Naota's.

What a selfish girl, Naota thought. That kind of selfishness was below that of a child.

"When you act selfish all the time, bad things are bound to happen, you know."

"Oh, well," Haruko replied. "If bad things happen, I'll deal with them. It's like eating bad ramen; it's part of the richness of life." She started slurping on the delicious stolen ramen.

"Well then, you should eat your own ramen," Naota complained.

They had been hanging out together for the past week, and Naota had been reminded how selfish a girl Haruko was. That girl only thought about what was good for her, and she didn't even try to hide it. It almost seemed like she was proud of this part of her character even.

And every time Naota saw the selfish parts of her personality, for some reason, it made him smile.

"This mist is so obnoxious." Haruko continued eating the ramen as she gazed at the city beyond the MM factory on the hill, completely vexed. The factory was hazy from the smoke it itself produced.

Naota knew that Haruko had been at war with MM this whole time. "Why do you hate MM so much? Is it your job?"

"They have something I want," Haruko said with a broad smile. "They took something, and I want it back."

The thing that she really wants must be that man Amarao spoke about, Atomsk. Naota didn't ask any further questions; even if he had, he probably wouldn't have gotten straight answers. That was Haruko's way; she was rather crude, yet she rarely spoke directly about why she was really there.

Anyway, there was something more important that Naota wanted to take this chance to ask her. "Why did you really come back?"

What's the real reason you came back to me?

Haruko replied, "I need you, Takkun."

What a terrible lie! Naota knew that Haruko didn't really need him at all. He knew it well. As he chewed another mouthful of the ramen he had shoveled into his mouth, Naota scowled; it really was disgusting. But then, he smiled again—because he was with her.

In contrast to that pleasant scene, below the fog of the city of Mabase, an unknown threat was growing.

In the night-cloaked back alleys, Mamimi and her new pet were hiding. The robotic Takkun had been growing, and it was now the size of a dog. Mamimi had been looking after it ever since she'd found it by the river, giving it cell phones as food.

After it had eaten her own cell phone, she'd gotten it into her head that it only ate cell phones. And nowadays, there were more than a few shops near the station that would hand over a cell phone if you were to leave a name and address, so Mamimi had collected as many phones as she possibly could, giving them all to Takkun.

Takkun had eaten them up—and with his ridiculous appetite, after he'd eaten them all up, he'd wanted even more. It was quite a lot of

work for Mamimi.

But soon, it had become clear that her new pet could eat things other than cell phones, as well. He had a number of things he liked, but they were mostly metal or electronic things. And as soon as he ate something, he would increase in size by roughly the same amount.

Now, robotic Takkun had become Mamimi's holy beast, complete with a collar attached to it. She called it a "holy beast" because that name came from the Endsville game.

It was a new unknown menace that was being cared for.

Two days earlier, the fire incidents had started up again, burning homes of students at Mabase Shinda High School—to be more precise, burning homes of students who had bullied Mamimi.

But Mamimi wasn't responsible. The culprit had been seen at the scene of the arson: In the dark night, a suspicious four-legged robot holding cigarettes in its mouth had set the homes on fire. Several passersby had reported the same thing.

It wasn't Mamimi who'd done it—Mamimi's pet had.

"Good Takkun," Mamimi said to it. "Don't do things that Mamimi doesn't like. Listen to what Mamimi tells you, and then Mamimi always will be with you. Mamimi likes Takkun when he's good."

"Gi gi gi."

Perhaps Mamimi was having a profound effect on the robot. As she pulled along the four-legged robot that made odd screeching sounds, the dangerous high school girl again began to prowl the city—the devil city, where the people of Endsville slept. "Go, holy beast!"

Chapter 3

The following morning, Miyaji went to visit Naota's house on her way to school.

Naota hadn't been in class the whole week, and when Miyaji had tried to call his home, his father had replied casually that Naota wasn't coming in that day, either. With no reason given, a student skipping school for a week was quite a serious matter.

"Good morning. It's Miyaji…" She peeked into the shop, which had no customers or shopkeepers. It was a bakery, but for some reason, the inside of the shop was full of stacked magazines, as though it were a publisher's warehouse. They looked like freshly printed mini comics. When she spotted the tide, "*Come on Mabase*," Miyaji cocked her head, feeling as though she'd seen it somewhere before.

"Good morning, teacher," a man from the back of the shop acknowledged her politely. It was Naota's father, Kamon Nandaba.

"If it's about Naota, I don't think he'll be going to school today, either."

"Is he unwell?"

"No he's perfectly fine—probably very well."

"If he isn't ill, then he really shouldn't be skipping school." Miyaji sounded like she was pleading.

Kamon was gazing at Miyaji with a knowing look, grinning broadly. With his long hair tied at the back of his neck, he looked far removed from practicalities, and he wore quite an impertinent expression. She couldn't tell what those eyes behind his glasses were thinking. She hadn't had much experience speaking to him before, so she felt a little awkward, but that didn't mean she was going to back down. She was a person of conviction.

"When I was in school, I was in charge of looking after the hamster,"

Kamon said out of the blue, using a very serious tone. "You know, I had to make sure the hamster was fed."

Where was this story coming from all of a sudden?

"But once, I took off school for three days. I was watching videos at home the whole time—Monty Python. You know it? It's really good. And in those three days that I didn't go to school, it died, the hamster. I was the only one in my class who was responsible for the hamster, so while I was away, no one took care of it. I learned my lesson, that I couldn't skip school. A son's failings are his father's failings, so I will sort this out myself."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Kill him."

"No, that's going a bit far." Miyaji was swept away by Kamon's words. "Fortunately, Naota wasn't in charge of the hamster. Anyway, could you please let me see Naota for a moment?"

"No, this is not just about boycotting school."

"Just?"

"Boycotting school isn't all. He hasn't come home at all for a while. For a while, we haven't really known—"

"He isn't here? Naota?" Miyaji was naturally quite distressed. "For a whole week? Mr. Nandaba, for a student not to come to school—"

"He gets good grades, doesn't he?" Kamon asked calmly.

"Class is important."

"His grades are always all fives. But once, it was written on one of his school reports that he could be a little more obedient. You're that teacher, aren't you? It's okay. Don't worry about his studying. We have a very good home tutor."

Terrible. This is a terrible family. The father is a little weird.

Even so, Miyaji thought, *if Naota wasn't at home, then where was he now?*

Morning rush hour was nearing in Mabase. The traffic on the roads increased, and the sidewalks were full of residents rushing to work or school.

Behind the station, there was a large park alongside a straight road. There was a slide and a sandpit there, and ginkgo trees surrounded the area. Of course, the rushing residents did not turn to see them—the homeless. They slept there as if they were dead, but the residents were too caught up in their own lives and so did not pay them any attention.

But now a girl was standing there, regarding two people sleeping on a park bench.

The girl was Ninamori. And the two people sleeping on the bench, rolled up in a single wool blanket, were none other than Naota and Haruko, the pair of traveling vagabonds. They looked like two animals sleeping in the same nest.

For a moment, Ninamori gazed down at the two sleeping faces.

Naota's eyes were closed, and his breath was strangely relaxed.

He cried, Ninamori thought. *He's stopped pretending to be a grown up.*

The class president who had found her classmate in the process of skipping school now wore a small, gentle smile on her face.

"I couldn't buy you boots, but try your best, Mr. Cat."

After some time had passed, she once again started toward the school to move on with her own day.

A thick mist surrounded the town. This wasn't morning mist, though, and it was even thicker than the day before.

Mamimi walked down a small alley to escape the clouded air.

Next to her, making strange mechanical sounds as it walked, was her mechanical Takkun. Takkun had grown up even more, and it was larger than a dog and closer to the size of a donkey.

"After tonight, I'll be able to forgive them," Mamimi muttered as she gazed down at a notebook. There were dark bags under her eyes, and one could tell she was tired just by looking at her. She had been "working" every night, but this was the first time she'd done it around the clock.

Mamimi's "work" was revenge, and the notebook in her hand contained a list of the people who deserved punishment, no doubt all names of people who had bullied her.

When Mamimi suddenly heard voices in front of her, she quickly hid herself in the shadows. She couldn't let anyone see her leading Takkun around.

When she peeked around to see the source of the voices, she saw a sake shop with a sign reading "Masamune's Sake." The voices belonged to two boys, Masashi and Gaku.

"Last night, I heard that Fujipyon's older sister's moped was done."

"That girl with the bleached blonde hair?"

"Everyone from Second Street over, everyone got something damaged…"

They were talking about Mamimi's work. Although arson was her preferred method, Takkun was more faithfully obedient to his own appetite than to Mamimi's orders, so she'd changed her battle plans a little. In other words, instead of setting fire to the house she wanted to attack, if it had a car or a bike, then she offered that to Takkun as food.

Now, as a result of her feedings, Takkun had grown in size, and Mamimi was a little troubled about where she would hide him that day. As she continued dragging Takkun down the alley, he began roaring out of nowhere: "Gi gi gi gi!"

That was the noise Takkun made before he jumped at food he'd spotted—and the thing that had taken Takkun's fancy was the sake store's three-wheeled truck.

Mamimi panicked and tried to pull on the chain attached to the robot's collar with all her might, but Takkun had grown so big that Mamimi's strength was no match for its own.

"Stop that. They're not on my revenge list."

The four-legged robot knocked away its master's powerless arms, though, and ran straight at the three-wheeled truck.

Mamimi was enraged. *Why, why do you never do what I want you to?*

"Why are you doing this? You have to listen to what I say, Takkun."

But Takkun ignored her words as it skillfully grabbed the truck and started chomping down on it. The metal frame and components were chewed to bits in its mouth and then swallowed completely. It had a terrifying bite and appetite.

The surprised ones were naturally Masashi and Gaku. After all, a robot beast had come bounding down the alley out of nowhere and eaten up their beloved truck.

There were people who were trying their hardest to hunt down that robotic monster: Amarao and the Department of Interstellar Immigration members.

Today, Amarao was in the passenger seat of the car that Kitsurubami was driving, reading a map on a panel that was installed in the car. It looked like a GPS system from its appearance, but it was actually a radar system for use on special missions, a piece of equipment designed to search out the components and terminal core that had separated from the giant MM robot.

Amarao and Kitsurubami had been searching for several days, but hadn't a clue yet as to where the terminal core had gone, although it shouldn't have had any mobility capabilities.

The terminal core had been communicating through special electronic waves with that towering hand, so they'd been tracing that electronic signal. But the signal had been weak and unstable, so the mission had encountered problems.

Finally, though, the car that Kitsurubami was driving was heading toward the correct destination. What had made all the difference to their mission was that, as of the night before, the electronic impulses from the terminal core had become clearer. Gradually, they had become stronger in output power, and now the team had narrowed down the area it could be in to a radius of a few hundred meters.

But that didn't mean they were overjoyed. This could be evidence that the damaged terminal core might be trying to self-repair.

Kitsurubami wore an uneasy expression as she drove the car. On top of the hill, the factory that had been emitting continuous smoke was now shooting out an even larger quantity of thick white smoke. It was almost as if it was angry that it couldn't fill up the entire world with smoke.

Now, she also had come to understand the true threat the MM factory posed.

"You saw it, too, didn't you? The footage?" Amarao asked.

"Last week, at the department," Kitsurubami replied.

A few days earlier, Kitsurubami had been dispatched to the central office, where she'd been shown some terrifying video footage.

At first, she'd thought the footage was of one of the poles. A flat mass of land spread out smoothly, like a frozen lake, and the land was flat as far as the eye could see, as smooth as a mirror. But it wasn't a polar cap she was seeing; it was a scene from another planet. In the sky, there was no familiar moon, but a floating satellite instead.

The strangest part of the video footage, stranger than the scenery, was the presence of a giant iron on the vast flatness. It looked

exactly the same as the MM factory that stood on the hill in Mabase. Moreover, it wasn't just an ordinary building; it moved across the continent. And it didn't just move. When it sensed a wrinkle on the surface of the ground, it would approach and flatten the offending imperfection.

Kitsurubami understood immediately without explanation: The planet was so completely smooth as a result of that giant iron's actions. The giant iron had wiped out the hills, the mountains, anything that wasn't flat. It was the embodiment of an obsessive desire to systematically smooth out the whole world.

Looking deeper in the far off distance of the footage, Kitsurubami was able to make out a number of irons moving across the land. The dead surface where nothing lived was a surreal world where irons slid silently.

Kitsurubami had shuddered when she'd understood the dangerous position their own world was now in. One of those giant MM irons had come to this planet.

"It's all right. If we can just get to the terminal core first, it will be all right," Amarao said. "We have to do something, or it's the end of the world."

"But…" Kitsurubami put all her energy into expressing a thought that had been nagging at her, "if that rumored Pirate King is here, then won't he do something?"

At the polar opposite of MM's obsessive principals of equality, a universal organization called the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood was fighting with all its might. But MM's most feared enemy wasn't a part of that brotherhood, rather a single man known as Red Pirate King Atomsk. Although he didn't belong to any camp, he had halted MM's progress on many planets in the galaxy, thwarting its ambitions.

"He's not one of us, so we can't rely on him," Amarao said. "Besides, there still has been no real sign of Atomsk."

Amarao had received information about a year prior that Pirate

King Atomsk had been captured by MM. And then, they suspected that robot Canti also had some kind of connection to Atomsk, which would explain why it gave off Atomsk's personal organism magnetism sometimes. If that were the case, then MM's persistence in trying to capture Canti made sense. And as Amarao had said, there had been no sign of Atomsk, so if he had fled from the danger, then they had no other hope except seeking the terminal core.

The signal turned red and Kitsurubami put her foot on the brake.

Amarao caught a glimpse of her white stocking-covered legs up her mini skirt, and he moved his eyebrows oddly. His eyes remained in that sideways glance position, looking at his subordinate's body.

Kitsurubami noticed his gaze immediately. She understood straight away what her boss was thinking; it was so easy to read.

As expected, Amarao spoke: "What do you do on your days off?"

Hey, the tone of your voice has changed, Kitsurubami thought. *At this critical time, you shouldn't be falling for feminine charms. Anyway, you're still in love with Haruko, aren't you?*

"Um, that's kind of private…" she trailed off, wanting to maintain a smooth working relationship.

I don't want to talk to you.

"Don't say such sad things. People weren't made to live alone." Amarao had placed his hand on top of Kitsurubami's on the gear stick.

Not again, Kitsurubami thought. *This man wants any woman in front of him. He thinks he can make any of the women working under him his. Idiot.*

"Work relationships can be problematic."

"What are you saying? Any problems that arise tend to be so small — Argh!"

They both were surprised by something suddenly coming at them

from the intersection—a giant, four-legged walking monster robot. A high school girl was clinging to it from its collar.

"Stop it, Takkun!" The high school girl screaming was, of course, Mamimi Samejima.

"Takkun! Terminal Kore!"

Even while misunderstanding the reason Mamimi had named the robot what she had, Amarao still correctly recognized what it really was.

"Commander, its size!"

"Geez, it's massive."

Amarao and Kitsurubami were taken aback by the size of the terminal core. They had been looking for something about the size of a kitten, but the thing that appeared before them was a robot the size of a horse. There was no questioning that the four-legged machine was the terminal core, though—even the radar panel was indicating it was.

Amarao had been wondering why the electromagnetic waves the terminal core gave off suddenly had gotten stronger, and now he knew. It had grown to a greater degree than self-repair alone would have allowed. But why?

"No, Takkun!" Mamimi screamed. "Mamimi doesn't want this!"

Could it be—Amarao thought—*Could it be that this high school girl has been feeding it?*

It hadn't been programmed to be looked after—yet peculiarly, it had allowed itself to be. Then again, considering it was an MM robot, was it really so strange that it had unexpected functions?

This, however, was not the time to wonder about how it had happened. Already, the car waiting at the opposite end of the intersection had been bitten and crushed. The terminal core somehow could function by eating cars, it seemed.

Then, the terminal core caught sight of Kitsurubami's car—and the four-legged thing started coming straight for them!

Amarao and Kitsurubami both immediately took out their guns and started firing, their bodies hanging out the car windows. But all those bullets rebounded off the terminal core's body. MM products were well known for their high-quality, durable materials.

Realizing they couldn't stop its progress, the duo leapt out the car windows. They had only just gotten out when the car was devoured by the terminal core, which cut into the hood and gobbled up the engine, seemingly its favorite part.

Sensing the danger, Amarao and Kitsurubami already had put some distance between them and the terminal core when they were startled by what they saw standing on the sidewalk next to it.

Kitsurubami muttered, "Lord Canti."

She was right. Standing there, for some reason, was Canti.

Amarao wondered what on Earth it was doing there. No, that much was obvious: It had followed the terminal core's signal. At least, that was the rational interpretation.

He confirmed that Canti's body was still blue. Of course. Only when it was receiving Atomsk's personal signal did it change to red.

"Gi gi gi gi gi!"

Having chewed up the car, the terminal core started reacting violently. It seemed that discovering Canti was a cause of excitement for it.

"Giii!"

With a speed of movement that they had not yet witnessed from the terminal core, it suddenly bore down on Canti. And as the terminal core unexpectedly changed direction, Mamimi was being dragged violently behind, gasping for breath.

Amarao and Kitsurubami stood frozen in front of the spectacle.

"What are you doing?" Amarao muttered.

The terminal core that had captured Canti didn't eat the robot; instead, it started doing something completely different.

It wasn't just a transformation; it was more a transmutation.

The terminal core had, in an instant, shifted shape, becoming a series of blocks, each less than one millimeter. From the four legs came silhouettes like unstable flames.

And then, Canti was caught up in it, too, synchronizing in response to that transformation.

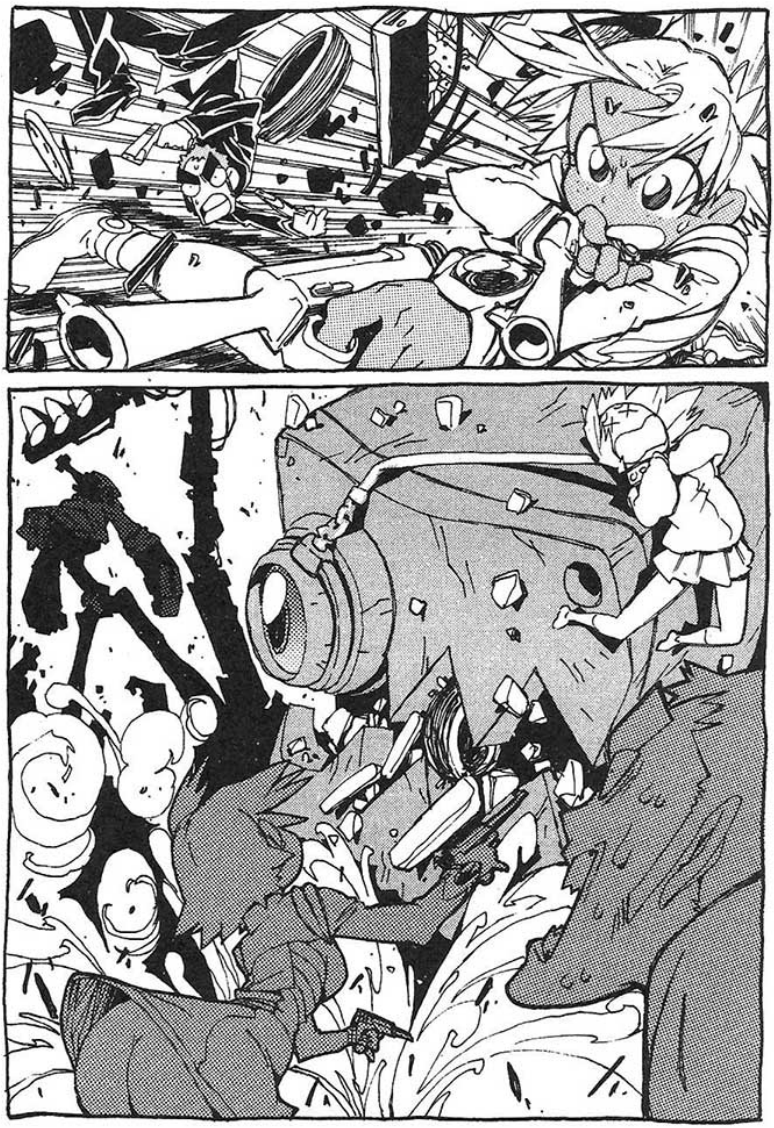
Amarao started to think that maybe the robot called Canti had in fact been created as part of the terminal core.

After Canti synchronized with the transformation, it returned back to normal, creaking as if it were in pain. Rather than becoming part of the terminal core, it was struggling to keep itself going as a separate entity.

"No…" Mamimi, who also had been caught up in the transformation, was struggling for breath. Getting caught up in the middle of a violently moving series of machines was not the safest thing she could've done.

Amarao ran toward those squirming machines and reached out his hand in an attempt to save Mamimi.

And when Kitsurubami witnessed that act of bravery, she reassessed her opinion of her boss a little.



However, Amarao got too close to the terminal core, and part of the suit he was wearing was caught up in the transformation, too.

"Damn!"

"Commander!"

The terminal core had now taken the shape of a tire—a large circle with a radius of a few meters. Canti was caught up in this, as was Mamimi, and now part of Amarao's suit.

It was then that Kitsurubami understood the reason that the terminal core had become a giant wheel. The circle distorted a little like an ellipse; then, using the elastic reaction from returning to its round shape, the core was able to jump—or maybe it was less that it had "jumped" than it had "flown." It rose up and up until it was a tiny speck in the sky.

It was then that a siren started to blare from the top of the hill; it was MM Factory's warning signal, but it was a much louder and more urgent siren than before. It could be heard not just in that area, but it every part of Mabase.

And it sounded just like an air raid siren.

Haruko, who had been sleeping on the bench, opened her eyes.

With her phenomenal eyesight, she spotted the figure of a machine soaring through the mist in the sky. And she could clearly make out that Canti was trapped inside that ring.

As she quickly jumped to her feet, she violently kicked Naota, who'd been sleeping next to her.

"This is no time to be sleeping!"

"What…? What is it?"

Haruko gleefully told the still half-asleep Naota, "It's the CLIMAX."

Chapter 4

The terminal core was flying straight toward the towering hand.

In the body that had transformed into the shape of a tire, Canti, Mamimi, and Amarao all were caught up—Canti and Mamimi completely solidified in the machine, and Amarao caught only by part of his suit. For that reason, Amarao was clinging on to part of the machine for dear life. If he were to be thrown off, then that would be it for him.

The terminal core was flying several meters above the ground. Amarao could see the whole of mist-covered Mabase in its eye, which was terrifying. If something hit him off, then that would be the end of it for him. Along with the wind rushing past his ears, Amarao could hear the sound of Mamimi screaming.

"Waaaaaaaaaah!" Although hers was definitely a scream of terror, it sounded not unlike the voice of a child on a roller coaster.

The terminal core then started to descend. Its destination was the towering hand—the giant palm reaching up into its field of vision. If they hit it at this velocity, it would be over for them all. Amarao resigned himself to his fate.

"Takkun, stop it!" Having used up the last of her breath to scream those words, Mamimi lost consciousness.

Whether or not those words had gotten through to it, the terminal core's flying speed started to ease; it violently landed on the towering hand as though a train linking up, hitting with a great *gon* sound.

Barely escaping with his life, Amarao quickly removed his trapped suit, thereby freeing himself from the terminal core.

Now, the terminal core that had landed in the center of the giant hand—which was spread out to about the size of a baseball field—connected part of its own body with the hand.

And the MM factory next to the towering hand, which was emitting more smoke than it ever had, started to shake.

It's going to move soon!

From the top of the towering hand, Amarao was looking down at the factory, stunned. The giant hand and the giant iron made him feel small. His phone rang, interrupting that thought; when he picked it up, he heard Kitsurubami's trembling voice.

"The pl-plant is moving."

Not first checking that her superior was unharmed was cold. But that aside, her observation was an important one: As it connected with the terminal core, the towering hand also was beginning to slowly move the giant iron. In other words, it was beginning what would amount to a terrifying clean up—one that would wipe out all life on this planet.

But Amarao saw something that indicated the crisis hadn't yet begun, that the world had not yet been abandoned by the gods of the galaxy. "No, it isn't moving yet," Amarao told his cold subordinate. "The terminal core hasn't been able to connect properly."

Although it had made contact with the towering hand, the terminal core was making an irregular mechanical sound and creaking unstably. It seemed that it was trying to change shape again so that it could connect properly, but that transformation wasn't going according to plan.

Something flew out from a part of its body, and the core reacted with a look of alarm.

Amarao realized the reason it wasn't working: The terminal core wasn't pure. Mamimi, who had passed out from shock, was still a part of its body, but she wasn't the problem—the impure part wasn't her, but Canti.

The body of the terminal core that was trying to connect now changed its color to red. Canti's part, however, still was blue.

Amarao recalled that Canti turned red only when it was emitting Atomsk's signal. Perhaps the problem was that the terminal core needed Red Canti to dock with the hand. No, that much was certain; if Canti didn't turn red, then the terminal core couldn't connect with the hand.

There was still a chance to save the world.

The quaking MM Factory's host computer started receiving reports.

> *«Terminal Core MMR Class [B].GH cannot link up. 07:13.*
>
> *MMR Class [K].001 denies fusion due to lack of signals from Atomsk. 07:13.*
>
> *Emergency report: earthling catalyst necessary for Atomsk change is approaching.»*

Amarao heard an explosion, a terrible sound that was none other than a Vespa engine.

Haruko was climbing vertically on her scooter, straight up the wall of the "wrist" of the towering hand. And clinging to Haruko's back was Naota, who looked astonished. Haruko probably had brought him along forcibly before he had a full grasp of the situation.

Amarao's immediate reaction was, "This is not good."

Canti had turned red before when it had swallowed up that boy Naota inside.

The terminal core was writhing on top of the giant hand, unable to make Canti turn red. And that was exactly where Haruko was taking Naota; she was going to give Naota to Canti. Why? To bring back Atomsk, of course. She didn't care about the danger it would bring to this planet.

Amarao had come to that conclusion because he knew all about Haruko's past and her motives, all about the way she lived her life.

Haruko, a.k.a. Raharu Haruha, was a member of the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood, which fought with MM, dividing up the galaxy. But the brotherhood was much more than a simple security organization like its name suggested; it was an organization that operated under the assumption that people should make their own decisions about what gave life value.

The opposing MM was a commercial venture, making things like genetic makeup into products. The law of the universe strictly prohibited making a business out of playing with life, but MM had repeatedly engaged in black market transactions and shady development experiments anyway. They had then pursued domination of the entire universe through their imperialist economy. But their true aim was to smooth out the whole of space. With that as their end goal, they had been developing primarily in the medical business area.

To ensure the life support of a group of chosen people, MM had been carrying out human experiments to create an individual who would become the ultimate donor. But a boy who had been created as a donor by these human experiments fled from an MM facility of his own free will. That boy's name was Atomsk. Eventually, that boy grew up and became feared as Red Pirate King. It became necessary for MM to retrieve Atomsk's body at any cost, so it had been pursuing him relentlessly.

On the other hand, the brotherhood had sought out Atomsk's cooperation many times. Because the brotherhood shared a common enemy in MM, it had wanted to protect Atomsk from being captured so they could become beneficial allies. But the man who went by the name Pirate King had not listened to its requests, instead pursuing an independent life. For that reason, the Galaxy Space Police Brotherhood had fought endlessly with him, too.

The brotherhood's number one investigator, Raharu Haruha, had fought with him countless times and was his closest rival. By now, the two of them had developed a relationship that was almost affectionate.

Finally, after one incident in which Atomsk sustained an injury, Raharu had succeeded in restraining him. She had joined her arm and his arm with shackles. But on the civilian boat they'd been using as a convoy, the captured Atomsk fell into enemy hands. And there were rumors that Atomsk had sacrificed himself to save Raharu.

All that had been left was the cuff on Raharu's left wrist.

Raharu Haruha had come to this planet as Haruko to capture the space pirate Atomsk on a Galaxy Space Police mission. She was there to gather evidence of MM's illegal activities, and also out of her own passionate love.

Amarao held a gun in his hand and fired at Haruko on the Vespa without hesitation. The gunshots were dry; they were, for the moment at least, warning shots.

That girl will do anything to get what she wants in the end, to obtain her enemy's amazing power. I can't let her do it. If she takes Naota near it, then she will realize her wish of reviving Atomsk!

Haruko managed to avoid Amarao's bullets, but pushing the Vespa to do so resulted in it toppling, throwing off both Haruko and Naota —but only Haruko was dexterous enough to twist her body to land on her feet.

Amarao was aiming for Haruko alone. He wanted to warn her to stop.

But Haruko was smiling boldly, because between the two of them was Naota, who was crying in pain from hitting his hip.

"Owww!"

Amarao looking at the brainless Naota, enraged. Seeing that the boy's face was bare, he yelled, "Why aren't you wearing your eyebrows? That woman is just using you!"

Naota didn't understand why he was being scolded and regarded Amarao suspiciously.

"You can't trust her. She's thinking only about herself. She doesn't care what happens around her. But you're different, right? Hey, look at that high school girl."

When Amarao pointed at Mamimi, Naota was taken aback. Mamimi was caught up in the terminal core. Her entire body was wrapped in a metal belt, and she looked just like a princess caught in a thorn bush. Her eyes were closed, and it appeared she had lost consciousness.

"You want to save her, right?" Amarao said. "You have to take responsibility for all this, too. You'll know when you're an adult. Come here. Don't listen to her."

Right now, this boy holds the destiny of the world in his hands. He can't let Haruko be free to do as she pleases.

But for some reason, the boy got up and walked over to Haruko as he stroked his thigh.

"No! Do you know what that woman is planning to do with you?!"

Amarao was in panic. *This is bad. He can't do it. He thinks that Haruko is on his side. He doesn't know about her bloodthirsty nature, and she has him under her thumb. He doesn't realize what she's going to do now. Brat!*

Haruko grabbed Naota's hand with a gentle smile. *"Now Takkun,"* she whispered, *"Takkun, I need you to help me get the thing I want."*

As she spoke, that gentle smile turned into a brutal smile.

"Itadaki-mammoth." With those meaningless words, Haruko took the guitar off her back and hit Naota with all her might.

"Waaaah!"

Naota was sent flying as if a car had hit him.

Harsh, Amarao thought. He had taken countless hits from Haruko, but this one had been far more violent.

Naota's body flew up a good distance before it came crashing down, precisely into Canti's open abdomen.

As was always the case after he'd "eaten" Naota, Canti immediately changed to a red color—and just as Amarao had predicted, the robot started merging as part of the terminal core.

And as the electronic brain that was its control center came online, the towering hand began to tremble.

"Look what you've done! This is precisely what MM wanted!"

Amarao had blamed Haruko for the mission and its problems, but he also was actually quite angry at Naota.

For her part, Haruko responded nonchalantly, "Canti has to turn red or Pirate King Atomsk won't come out."

"They're going to use Atomsk's power to activate the plant! They're going to destroy this planet!"

"I told you already: I know. As long as I get Atomsk, I don't care what happens to this planet."

The towering hand was no longer trembling; now, it started to move. It was moving very slowly, but the large hand was definitely making its way toward the iron beside it in an effort to grab it.

Guon… guon… guon…

The palm that had been facing up now started to turn face down so that it could grasp the iron.

For that reason, it was neither the time nor the place for Amarao to be arguing with Haruko; he was, after all, standing on the palm, which was now turning downward. He scrambled desperately to get to the back of the hand, where he wouldn't be thrown off. But this was a fairly difficult and high climb. After deciding a route based on the hand's movements, Amarao had no choice but to climb a vertical wall without equipment to help. If he made one wrong step, then he would fall.

Annoyingly, Haruko was jumping from finger to finger of the giant hand with a calm expression.

Amarao tutted at his own misfortune. *I told him that you can't trust this woman! She does only what's good for her.*

Amarao had just about managed to make his way to the back of the hand—but by that time, the palm was facing the iron and moving steadily toward the factory. If the hand grabbed the handle of the factory, then the annihilation of the planet would begin.

But at just the instant it reached to grab the handle, the towering hand's movements stopped suddenly. It was in position now to make contact with the handle, so why wasn't it trying to close its fingers around it?

"Why…?" Glimpsing down through a gap in the giant fingers, Amarao saw something between the palm of the hand and the iron that was getting in the way of them making contact. Yes, he could see it: In between was the luminescent Red Canti!

It must have stopped itself from becoming a part of the terminal core and separated itself. And now, Canti was holding up the giant hand as if it weighed nothing. Canti really might be the infamous Pirate King!

From one of the giant fingertips where she stood, Haruko was watching, too. She looked delighted. This was the first time Amarao had seen her expression so full of pleasure and excitement. What they were witnessing was the power that she had been running around the universe to obtain—and now, it was right in front of her. She was passionately excited about seeing her true prey.

There was no doubt about it, Amarao thought—*that Red Canti really had to be Red Pirate King.*

But Haruko's expression suddenly turned to one of puzzlement.

Amarao quickly glanced at Canti. For some reason, the red robot was swiftly returning to blue. Yet its face monitor, which was facing skyward, was emitting a red light.

That red light was a sign of something just about to begin, something no one could have predicted.

Naota thought he must be dreaming. It was a dream that looked very realistic, though—a lucid dream. Moments ago, he'd been hit by Haruko and landed inside Canti's abdominal cavity. But stretching out before him, he could see a snowy winter landscape. The landscape was Mabase; he could tell, because he saw the burnt remains of the old elementary school. But there was no school building there. *Oh, that's right, this was the future,* Naota realized. His dream was of the future, but he was remembering a few months back in the future. He was surprised that he already had memories of a future time inside him—but because of this, Naota knew why there was no building among the school's remains.

That winter, or the winter in the dream, Mabase had been hit by a massive snowstorm for the first time in recorded history. Under the weight of the fallen snow, the building had listed. And because it became a dangerous place for the kids to play in, it had been demolished. The mayor had reacted quickly to the citizens' demands.

The sun shone over and over, and the scenery changed to spring. In his dream, the flow of time was disordered and arbitrary. Naota realized that he was now in middle school. He was in a classroom after school, and Masashi, Gaku, and Ninamori all were around him. They all had gone on to the same school.

"Naota, come to the basketball club with us," Masashi said.

But Naota didn't reply straight away; he was thinking over what had happened to him as a middle schooler, recalling memories and trying to organize his thoughts.

He could see from the classroom window that the MM factory on the hill was still boarded up. The official announcement had declared that there was no hope for reopening it after an accident had occurred there. The giant iron still sat squarely on the hill, looking down at the town, but it no longer pumped out white

smoke. The factory was dead. And because of that, there were now a large number of residents who had lost their jobs. The number of people leaving the city to find work was increasing by the day.

Mamimi had been one of the people to leave in this outflow, quitting high school and moving to Tokyo.

His route to school had changed, but Naota still crossed Mabase Bridge, and as he did, he would remember the days he had spent with Mamimi there.

Mamimi had said she wanted to become a photographer before she'd left. She'd won a prize for a photo she'd sent into a magazine, and she'd made up her mind as a result of that. The photo that had appeared in the magazine was one taken at that critical moment when Naota was hit by Haruko's Vespa, and she'd entitled the picture "Goodbye Naota." Mamimi had used Naota's real name—for the first and last time.

Home was the same as ever. Kamon was still operating the bakery and also making mini comics that he couldn't sell. And Canti was still at the Nandaba home, as well—alternately being used by Kamon or slacking off. His body color stayed blue for the most part, though.

The mystery surrounding their pet cat, Miyu Miyu, had deepened. Now, Naota suspected that the mysterious voice Haruko had been talking to all that time actually belonged to Miyu Miyu. He suspected as much because, later, he had eavesdropped on Kamon talking with that same mysterious voice, and only Kamon and Miyu Miyu had been in the room.

Moreover, the conversation that he'd eavesdropped on was an astonishing one. He'd been told that no one had any idea where his mother was, but from this conversation, Naota discovered that she was a colleague of Haruko. In other words, she was a member of the space police. Naota kept quiet about what he'd heard, though, and never questioned Kamon further about it. He knew the reason his father had hidden the information from him was because it was best for Naota that way.

Before Naota graduated from elementary school, his brother Tasuku had returned to Japan once—to introduce them to his fiancée. After he introduced that blonde girl to his family, he returned back to America. It looked like he was going to become a professional player over there, on a team that MM sponsored. Naota thought that everything probably would work out fine.

Shigekuni kept watching baseball, but Naota never wore his brother's hand-me-down Mabase Martians uniform again. Nor did he walk around carrying his brother's bat when he went out anymore. He'd had enough with baseball; it wasn't for him. Anyway, there were other things that he wanted to do.

"Come on, join the basketball club with us," Gaku said.

Naota hadn't joined any clubs when he'd started middle school, although Gaku and Masashi had recommended the basketball club.

"No, I don't want to play basketball," Naota declined. "I'm going to start a club of my own."

Ninamori, who had been listening to the conversation that was going on right next to her, immediately guessed correctly the club Naota would want to start. "Easy listening, right?"

Naota thought that women were very astute.

In Naota's room, the guitar *she* had left was still leaning there. Naota was waiting for an opportunity to use it. It was the only thing she'd left behind when she disappeared… from this city… from this planet.

Out of nowhere, from above their heads, a bright light appeared. A red light. The source of that red light spoke to Naota.

"Are you okay with this?"

It was the first time Naota had heard this male voice, but he felt as though it were strangely familiar, as if it were a voice he'd heard many times before. So, Naota wasn't suspicious of the red light source, and instead he answered its question.

"Yes, I'm fine with this."

This is what I chose. If I had chosen another option, then the result would have been different—but when it came down to it, this was the only thing I could choose.

Naota sensed that the red light was laughing. And in the next moment, the light source shone even brighter. The source of the red light was getting closer to him.

In that same moment, Naota lost his future memories, and he was once again returned to the moment when he'd been gobbled up by Canti.

Canti's face monitor continued shining—and from its red light, something was coming out.

Amarao thought it was going to be another guitar super weapon; instead, it was the body of a child. It was Naota.

He was emitting some kind of glow like a red aura—and this Red Naota kicked up with all his might against the palm of the giant hand, which weighed the equivalent of a mountain.

And with that one attack—really, just with that *one* attack—Red Naota managed to kick away the entire body of the towering hand. It was an unbelievable sight.

Afterward, Red Naota simply stood sedately on top of Canti's head.

Still clinging to the part of the hand that had been moving toward the iron just a moment ago, Amarao gazed at Naota with a stunned expression.

"That kid… he's the Pirate King!"

From Canti's head, which was still at his feet, Red Naota pulled at two guitars; with one neck grasped in each hand, he separated the guitars from the robot's head, and then he merged them with each other, creating a double-neck guitar.

Red Naota kicked off Canti's head and flew. (It appeared he now could fly freely.) And with the guitar in hand, he hit at the still-turning enemy body that he had kicked away moments ago.

There was a flash of blinding light. Instantly, the towering hand stopped moving, almost as though it been petrified.

This was no fight. This was an adult using silent force to punish a child.

It was then that a red shining insignia appeared on Red Naota's head—the Pirate King's insignia. Somehow, the Pirate King's power was inside Naota now.

As Haruko watched Red Naota, she wore a cold expression that hid a terrifying rage. With a bloodthirsty voice, she called out, "Takkun, you can't do that! That power is mine!"

With her guitar in hand, Haruko was in fierce pursuit of Naota, who had landed on a fingertip of the hand. But Naota easily stopped her attacks.

Amarao was stunned by what he was seeing—but at the same time, he realized this was their chance.

Naota felt betrayed by Haruko, and he was suffering greatly because of this. Amarao could feel Naota's passionate rage in response to Haruko's treatment of him. And Naota definitely held the power of the Pirate King; he had skillfully defeated the giant MM robot, and now, if he could defeat Haruko, the Earth would be

secure. Yes, this was their best chance—in one move, they could eliminate all the extra terrestrials.

"I won't let you get in the way of what I want!"

Haruko and Red Naota continued their violent clashing of guitars on the fingers of the halted hand, sending bright white sparks flying with the amazing energy of their battle.

Haruko swung her guitar wildly, but Red Naota was able to blow her away with his lightning fast attacks. And with a loud metallic sound, Haruko's guitar went soaring high into the air.

He did it! Amarao screamed internally with delight. The boy did it! He's the world's hero! This is the last attack. Show that selfish girl your rage!

In the next moment, however, Amarao stood frozen to the spot in fear.

Robbed of her weapon, Haruko glared at Red Naota with fervent fury. Her strong feelings had saturated her consciousness and become thought waves, which now spread into the surrounding area. Those strong thoughts spread to the opposing Naota who stood before her, and then to Amarao, and even to the unconscious Mamimi, who opened her eyes. They all could feel the pure rage.

To be defeated by you… you, who took the power I wanted so bad and fought me with it. There's nothing that can be done about it now; because I used you, you betrayed me, but I don't regret doing it. I knew how senseless the things I've done were, and I did them anyway. I don't expect to be forgiven, but no one has the power to forgive me, anyway. No one has the power to punish me. The way of the brotherhood is to live by one's own values. That's the difference between that evil MM and us: We both do bad things, but they make up excuses for their evil deeds. Their machines have a weak spirit with their forgiveness of others, their unsatisfactory value system, and their inside-out, obsessive, extremist equality. So, Takkun, do what you will—under the name of your justice, turn that super weapon against me.

"Do it!" Amarao screamed. If he hadn't screamed, then he wouldn't

have been able to hold up against her intense thoughts. Amarao was swamped by the primitive fear of a person who had angered the gods; he screamed so as not to lose control, and his entire body was invigorated.

"She's not going to do anything about MM! She's too dangerous to this world… You must recognize it!"

Red Naota looked straight into Haruko's eyes for a moment, gripping the double guitar in his hand. A few tense seconds passed.

Then, the red aura around Naota's body disappeared.

The insignia on his forehead also dissipated, and Naota returned to his normal self.

It was then that Naota offered the Pirate King's guitar to Haruko.

What are you doing? Amarao couldn't believe his eyes.

I can't believe it, Naota Nandaba! Have you betrayed the entire planet? You threw away an opportunity to save the planet from danger! And why didn't you take revenge on the woman who betrayed you? Why did you hand it over to her?

As she accepted the guitar, Haruko seemed confused by it all, as well, evidenced by the fact that the thought waves around her had vanished. Had Naota escaped from becoming the Pirate King by his own conscious decision? If so, why? Not understanding his reasoning, she regarded Naota with a baffled expression.

Naota had lost the red aura, but his cheeks now were red for another reason. He then uttered the simple words that he'd been wanting to say to her all that week—no, since much farther back than that: "I like you."

He kissed the puzzled Haruko, mouth to mouth. It was a rich kiss, without hesitation and prolonged.

The observers gaped at the two of them, and among them, Amarao stood dumbfound. Still a prisoner of the terminal core, the recently revived Mamimi watched their kiss with cold eyes.

How much time passed, no one could say. But in the moment when Naota finally took his lips off Haruko's, *it* appeared—from Naota's head.

It may have been another one of the hornlike protrusions, but this one was a lot bigger, and it soared high into the sky from Naota's head.

It was a giant bird-headed and winged man with a muscular chest and arms. His entire body was muscled and toned. The large black wings could freely manipulate gravity just from being spread, it seemed, and he floated as he swished through the air. On his right wrist, he was wearing a bracelet—one half a pair of handcuffs, with a chain link attached… the severed cuffs.

Haruko was ecstatic at seeing the birdman. "Atomsk!"

It may have just been coincidence, but when Haruko shouted that single word, it acted like the shot of a gun triggering an avalanche: The towering hand—MM's robot that they were standing upon—started to crumble. As it broke up into separate bits, the entire body of it became unstable and started to collapse, unable to hold up its own weight.

It was like something from a nightmare. If the structure were to fall to the ground, there would be tragic losses as a result. The metal monster was taller than even a skyscraper, and it was going to fall onto the residential blocks like a massive tree.

But something happened to prevent that: The mass of debris stopped mid-collapse and started to float in the air. And then, it started to rise up, as if lifted by an invisible god.

The person creating this miracle, equal to the parting of the seas, was Atomsk, of course.

At some point, the floating Atomsk's head had become a localized typhoon, which created a giant twister that exhibited amazing sucking power. The towering hand was being gradually drawn in. No, it wasn't simply drawn in—Atomsk controlled the suction and twister himself.

"N.O.?" While he muttered to himself, Amarao also was pulled up into the swirling air, and soon he was caught up in the twisting air, flying inside it. However, in contrast to the towering hand, Amarao's body slowly descended to earth. Somehow, the power could choose not to suck certain things in; the power was devastating, but also reasonable. Amarao had escaped unharmed—only the eyebrow stickers were damaged, having been ripped off Amarao's face and blown away.

Round and round and round… the air around Mabase was being swirled as if it were inside a giant blender. The brown leaves of the ginkgo trees were blown from their branches and danced like butterflies in the air. And now, the majority of Mabase residents who hadn't deserted after the factory closed were watching the spectacle above their heads, unaware of the danger.

Around and around and around… until Mamimi—who had come free from the machine, Canti—who had returned to blue, Amarao—minus eyebrow stickers, and Naota—who had separated from the Pirate King—all had been picked up by the swirling wind and then dropped down in a safe place, unharmed. The vortex was Atomsk's energy, which was carefully controlled, right down to the smallest detail.

It was an incredible power the Pirate King held. And to Naota, who had been in contact with it for a moment, it wasn't the slightest bit mysterious. The owner of that red light was definitely an amazing man.

The twister finally sucked everything within the vortex inside Atomsk's head, and then it disintegrated. It had sucked in every single piece of debris from the giant MM robot—that, and the smoke. It had cleaned up that gloomy white smoke.

For the first time in a long time, Mabase was filled with the shining sun and blue sky.

The black-winged Pirate King then closed the N.O. and, with the same lightning speed with which he'd appeared, he jumped up into the sky.

In the bright blue, completely cloudless sky, a yellow Vespa floated.

On the seat, of course, sat Haruko. Although she had whistled for her scooter quickly, Atomsk already had disappeared into Mabase's skies by the time she was on it.

Seated on the floating Vespa, Haruko looked down at the bracelet on her left arm. On the metal band was a short chain link, which was pointing up toward the heavens, showing her where Atomsk had flown.

Naota, who was standing on the hill, was staring up at Haruko, looking at her with all his heart.

The wild girl who rode her yellow scooter… that untamed girl who had at first been a hated housemaid… she had hit Naota with her guitar countless times, knocked him over with her Vespa, and used him like he was a fool. She had acted selfishly and violently and irresponsibly. Yet in the end, Naota had confessed that he liked her despite it all.

Haruko lingered, staring affectionately into the sky where the chain was pointing, but finally, she smiled with resignation, knowing that nothing could be done, and looked down at Naota.

"This is all your fault. I've lost sight of him." Haruko's tone was unusually kind. As she came to this realization herself, she smiled a little wider.

The two of them regarded each other as the brown leaves danced to the ground.

Finally, Haruko spoke gently. "Want to come with me?"

Naota thought to himself, *You have no intention of taking me.*

"You can't, huh?" Haruko said. "You're still just a kid, Takkun."

With those parting words, she pulled down her goggles and turned the accelerator. With a massive boom, the Vespa sped away into the

blue sky, gradually getting smaller and smaller, until it was visible no more.

After a short while, Naota noticed the discarded base guitar near him—Haruko's guitar. He picked it up and tried to play a chord, but a painful sound came out instead. It was the noise signaling the end of this special season—it was Naota's and Haruko's parting.

Afterword

Out of the entire series, the one scene I like most is when Naota ran through the town at night to meet up with Mamimi; also, I really like the atmosphere when those two were playing by the riverbank.

And if that's the case, then when I think about it, I realize that I'm already an adult.

Why's this? Because I find amusement in the feeling of sorrow.

Originally—I mean, when I was much younger—sorrow was no more than a negative feeling to me. *That* feeling now is very distant in my memories, so the picture I've painted of my childhood years has turned out a little differently from how my life really was then.

One's set of values changes as the years pile on. Only adults are really able to efficiently put the negative emotions to good use, right?

That being said, we must not overlook the fact that even when we become adults, we are still limited beings.

For everything you gain, there will be something lost—and for everything you lose, there will be something gained. I thought the person who first made me realize this was amazing.

For example, when you lose a precious treasure, you gain the feeling of having lost a treasure. Or when you finally realize a dream after many years, you lose that passion of wanting to make that dream a reality.

You might think it no more than simple rhetoric, but if you could have a sense of value like from the point of view of an objective god, you would have access to an extremely simple yet profound truth.

But in reality, this thesis is pretty impractical, because there aren't any humans who can peer out from a god's point of view. Humans always will have individual desires, making them unable to see that

what's lost and what's gained are equal, that there's usually a relationship between supply and demand.

I apologize to all my future descendents for this example, but people who collect trading cards value those they have multiple copies of differently than those they don't have. From a god's point of view, they are all equal cards, but for humans who are limited by circumstance, that is not the case. The special value of each individual card is determined by the current status of the owner's collection.

Value comes from purpose. Therefore, in reality, when people lose something important, they may not realize they also have the good fortune of making a profit.

Because of this, the words "for everything you lose, there will be something gained" take on a sharp meaning. When considering the concept of a god's point of view, we can think of purpose and value not as absolutes, but as things that will change to some degree, such as when you've suffered a massive disappointment, or maybe when you've gained the power to save yourself.

Indeed, according to your purpose, the value of all things that surround humans—all the rabble—will change. If you lose all interest in collecting trading cards, the things that had been treasure up until that day will suddenly turn to waste paper.

This has become a bit of a lecture on the value in economics, but this is a very important element of my own interpretation of the heroine that is Haruko Haruhara.

As you know, this book is a novelization of an anime screenplay. The story was basically created with the combined efforts of Director Tsurumaki and myself. And the ideas of everyone at Gainax can be found scattered throughout.

I would like to give my deepest thanks to character designer Yoshiyuki Sadamoto; animation director Tadashi Hiramatsu; Hiroyuki Imaishi and Yusuke Yoshigaki, who illustrated the novel

for me; my editor, TakahiroYamazaki; producer Hiroki Sato; all the other staff; all the people who sent fan letters; and of course, all of you who are reading this right now.

When we become adults, we lose what it is to be a kid. Even as adults, we are limited beings—but I feel it is because we are limited that we can walk tall.

Being a limited being is not an obstacle to filling your hands abundantly. Haruko, who is greedy and free from anyone's restraint, shows us it's quite the opposite. After all, she is no more than a limited being, yet she's able to live a wild life.

"It's like eating bad ramen; it's part of the richness of life." Anyone who can say that with a laugh seems to be a cool adult to me.

To a new century of full hearts.
— Yoji Enokido (12/14/2000)